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COBALT-SERIES

# マリア様がみてる

真夏のページ

今野緒雪

集英社

# Volume 13

## One Page of Midsummer

### Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

– But having said that, it's currently summer vacation.

They don't have to pay attention to the pleats of their skirts or their white sailor collars, and can run around noisily.

Now now, young ladies.

Don't forget that Maria-sama is always watching over you from heaven.

# **For Short, Operation OK (Tentative)**

## **Offer and Plot**

### **Part 1.**

"What? My archaic dictionary?"

She turned around, feeling his gaze.

"Ah, yeah ... no."

His inarticulate response matched the tedious expression on his face.

"Which is it?"

"Yeah" and "No" were complete opposites, like plus and minus. Well, it could make sense if the "no" was a correction of the earlier "yeah." Realizing this, Yumi reached for the archaic dictionary that he'd removed from between the bookends on her desk, but contrary to her expectations, Yuuki said, "Thank-you," and turned around. So then where was he going with that "no" at the end of his sentence?

"Yuuki."

Yumi called out to the figure in the white athletic singlet that was walking away. Having just returned from summer camp, her younger brother's skin was bronzed like he'd been to the beach. Supposedly, the camp was to prepare for their school festival, but it looked as though he'd had plenty of time to run around.

"Was there anything else you wanted to borrow?"

"No."

Well geez. Here's another "no." But why was he acting so indecisive? So Yumi waited for what he was about to say next, and, after his eyes seemed to swim for a while he said:

"Um, can I turn down the temperature on the air-con?"

"No way."

Naturally, Yumi rejected this instantly.

"The room's too hot."

"It's perfect. It's not good for you to have the temperature too low."

Men are typically said to be more sensitive to heat, and this statistic applied exactly to the Fukuzawa household. Her father and Yuuki were both sensitive to the heat and suffered in summer. Her mother and Yumi were both sensitive to the cold, so winter was harsh for them.

"So being too hot's good for the body then?"

Not giving up, Yuuki grabbed the front of his athletic singlet and fanned himself with it.

"I didn't say that. But if you lowered the temperature, then I'd be cold."

"Couldn't you put something on?"

"This is my room. Why don't you take something off?"

"What else could I take off?"

"..."

Indeed.

Short running pants. He was already bordering on being an intrusion in a young lady's room. Well, since he was already wearing so little, taking something off probably wouldn't cool him down all that much.

"You could go back to your own room."

Yumi said, a bit cruelly.

"I'm not leaving. My room's unbelievably bad."

"A burning hell?"

"Yeah. I'd get heatstroke in 15 minutes."

So he meekly lowered his head, imploring her to let him stay. Yumi agreed, saying, "There there." Then, for her cute little brother's sake, she lowered the temperature on the air-con by one degree. A warrior's compassion.

Beep.

The truth was that the air-con in her brother's room was currently broken.

No-one knew how long it had been playing up. But apparently it had been making strange noises for a while now. Then, last night when he got

back from camp and switched it on, it made a single loud noise and wouldn't start, no matter what he tried.

According to Yuuki, "That was probably the air-con's death rattle." But it wasn't necessarily dead yet. There was a chance it could be repaired.

They'd called an electrician to repair it, but he seemed quite busy and couldn't come until the day after tomorrow. So Yuuki had been borrowing a corner of Yumi's room since this morning, doing his summer homework. He could go to the library if he wanted somewhere more comfortable, but so far it hadn't come to that.

He apparently preferred the shame of intruding in his older sister's room to going out on his bicycle in this heat.

(Huh? But.)

After Yumi swung her chair back to her desk, she suddenly realized that it shouldn't have been that hard for him to ask her to lower the air-con temperature.

What just happened ... right, it was like there was something he had to say, but he thought the time wasn't right, which was what the "no" was referring to.

Spin, spin, spin.

She thought as her chair swung.

She left it alone for a while, but it nagged at her, so she turned to her younger brother who was leafing through the dictionary at her low, glass-topped table and called to him.

" ... Yuuki?"

Then Yuuki raised his head and said loudly:

"Say, Yumi!"

"Wh-what?"

They weren't bloodshot, but there was strength in his eyes. Seeing his resolve, Yumi immediately put herself on guard.

"Well."

"Y-yes?"



She didn't know what he was going to say, but she would listen with dignity and maturity. Their age difference may be less than a year, but that didn't change the fact that she was the older sister.

"Will the Lillian's student council help out at the Hanadera school festival again this year?"

"... That's all you wanted to ask?"

So apparently the school festival was the topic for the conversation. But she still couldn't see the root of the problem.

"The second semester's almost here and we haven't had a planning meeting yet."

"Oh, really?"

Yumi didn't really know the details, but Rei-sama was supposed to be their primary contact.

"And so, while we're just talking, would it be possible to have an introductory meeting beforehand ... that sort of thing."

"Wha – !?"

Yumi's voice instinctively rose when she heard this unexpected request. Yuuki responded by hastily waving both his hands and saying:

"No, it's not like that. It's just that there are some things we have to prepare, and if we had the meeting a bit earlier than that would be a huge help to us ... that's all I meant."

Mumbling unintelligibly.

"Frankly, to finalize our planning, we need to know how far the Lillian's assistants are prepared to go, you know ... something like that."

"..."

She'd been listening silently, and Yuuki looked at her with upturned eyes and said, "So it's no good after all." So then, hmm, that was it then, he'd said it expecting to be turned down.

"Is that all?"

Yumi asked, arms folded.

"What do you mean, 'Is that all?'"

"You're not having any impure thoughts about it?"

"I-impure !? What's impure?"

This time his eyes looked down. Yumi stuck her index finger up and said:

"For example, say you wanted to kneel at the feet of the true princess Sachiko-sama. Or you wanted to get closer to the charming Shimako-san. Or perhaps you wanted to cross swords with the Takazura top-talent Rei-sama."

Yumi enthusiastically described the three beautiful Roses of Lillian's Girls Academy. But Yuuki suppressed a laugh, poking fun at his older sister's speech.

"Setting aside the first two, I wonder about that third one."

"Those are just examples. I told you that."

"Well, if it's an example."

With that confirmed, Yuuki's serious expression returned.

"I'm not going to say those sort of feelings don't exist. The Lillian's girls are an unknown world to the boys, so of course they're going to be interested ... but I'll tell you right now no-one's going to confess their love or anything."

An unknown world. The boys. Interested. Just hearing it was enough to make her dizzy. These were the sort of phrases that must never be spoken in front of the man-hating Sachiko-sama.

"You're asking an awful lot, you know."

"Yeah. You're right. Sorry."

Yuuki looked a bit despondent. Poor boy. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place, between his school friends and his older sister.

"So you're the gofer for your seniors? Just what kind of person is this year's Hanadera student council president?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"I guess."

No matter who it was, Yumi thought he had to be better than the Yuuki-ogling Kashiwagi-san. But if they were rude and worked him relentlessly, then that would also be a problem.



"You know, Yumi, this isn't an official request, so you can say no."

Yuuki was still acting so indecisive.

"Yeah."

Even as she was nodding, Yumi wondered whether it would be okay to deny the request based on her own judgment.

Certainly, it wasn't an official offer.

She'd only heard it because she and her brother lived under the same roof and both happened to have been thrust into their respective school's student councils.

But, what was that? For some reason, she put the brakes on before turning him down completely, as though something were telling her to hold on a minute.

Telling her to wait a minute and think about it.

"Hmm."

"Thinking about it, the only way to have it during summer vacation is as a voluntary meeting. It was asking too much, right from the start."

"Be quiet for a while, Yuuki."

Scolding her grumbling younger brother. Older sister needs to run her generally under-utilized gray matter at full speed for a while, so she can do without the interruption.

(If we do that, it'll turn out like so. But if we use this well, then maybe –  
)

Yuuki was watching her expression, but she ignored that and clapped her hands.

"Okay, I've got it!"

"Um ... Yumi?"

"Let's put this on hold for now."

"Huh?"

"Can't you hear? Put it on hold. I'll have to consult with the other members."

"Huh!?"

For something that really wasn't all that shocking, Yuuki was completely taken aback, and came over as though to hug her.

"Yu-yu-yu-yumi. When did you become such a power player?"

"Don't be silly. I told you, I have to consult with them. At any rate, I can't say anything until I've talked to Rosa Foetida, Rei-sama."

Strike while the iron is hot. Yumi retrieved her student notebook from the drawer and checked the phone number.

"Rei-sama? Oh, not Sachiko-san?"

Yuuki looked confused as he fetched the phone handset for her, and Yumi nodded.

"Yeah. Well."

There was no way she could discuss what to do about Sachiko-sama with Sachiko-sama herself, was there?

## Part 2.

" – Well, I suppose."

Yumi sipped her lemonade through the straw and sighed.

"I should have known that Yoshino-san would also come if I called Rei-sama."

"What's this? You make it sound like I'm a hanger-on, like goldfish droppings."

Yoshino-san pouted as she poked her straw at the vanilla ice-cream in her tea-flavored ice-cream float. Sitting next to her, Rei-sama stirred her strawberry shake, smiled wryly and declared:

"Huh? It doesn't just "sound like" it, it's exactly what you are, Yoshino. When you saw me getting ready to go out, you badgered me with questions like "Where are you going?" and "Who are you meeting?" When you found out I was seeing Yumi-chan, you stuck to me as though it were completely natural."

"Hmph. It's not like I wanted to go somewhere with you, Rei-chan. I just wanted to see Yumi-san."

Her sulking figure looked more like a puffer-fish than a goldfish. Yoshino-san didn't find it funny that her "beloved Rei-chan" had hit the nail on the head.

"Alright, alright. If that's what you say it is."

"Such an insufferable tone of voice."

Yoshino-san thumped against Rei-sama's sturdy upper arm. Um, please don't take this sort of lovers' quarrel outside of your house. Especially not now, when all of Japan is sweltering.

"If Yoshino-sama is goldfish droppings, just what kind of droppings does that make me?"

Noriko-chan mumbled, having silently watched their back-and-forth argument.

In a bad mood, Yoshino-san's response was somewhat prickly.

"At best, maybe rice fish droppings?"

"Ah, so then I'm the rice fish?"

Shimako-san asked, with an expression that was part annoyed but still part pleased. If Noriko-chan was rice fish droppings, then Shimako-san was automatically rice fish.

"Hey, hey, do the droppings cling to rice fish when they swim too?"

"Ah."

Everyone's face froze when Yumi asked this. She didn't think she'd misspoken, but wasn't completely sure, and it was Rei-sama that came to her senses first.

"... How about we get to the main topic?"

She suggested, choking on her shake a little bit.

Yumi had thought it would be a simple matter to get Rei-sama's opinion, but it had turned into a major production. Five of the six Yamayurikai members, basically everyone except Sachiko-sama, had assembled.

She'd phoned Rei-sama this morning, saying there was something she wanted to discuss. Then Rei-sama had done the helpful thing and invited Shimako-san. And it just so happened that Noriko-chan had been at Shimako-san's house, or rather at their temple, and those two had come together.

Despite being a weekday, it was summer vacation, so the cafe a short distance from K station was bustling. Or perhaps it was because it was 3 o'clock, the perfect time for afternoon tea. Rei-sama and Yoshino-san had arrived early and waited in line, so they got a table right at the appointed time and the entire group of five didn't have to wait in the blazing sun.

" – Basically, Yumi-chan wants to accept her brother's offer. For Sachiko's sake."

Rei-sama briefly summarized the contents of their earlier phone conversation.

"It's not that I actively want to accept their offer, it's more that I'm wondering what everyone else thinks about accepting."

Yumi answered, a bit indecisively. She was an official Yamayurikai representative, but just a bouton after all. It was a position where she could suggest things, but not force anyone to do anything.

"Yeah, you're right. I was just thinking that I should start coming up with some counter-strategies too."

Shimako-san and Yoshino-san nodded in agreement with Rei-sama's words. – But there was one person looking confused.

"Um, pardon me. I'm new here, so I don't really understand what you're talking about."

Noriko asked, having raised her hand to speak. Since she'd only joined Lillian's Girls Academy this year, it was only natural that she didn't grasp the situation.

"Frankly, Sachiko-sama hates men."

Yoshino-san said coldly.

"Rosa Chinensis ... ah, so that's it."

"You don't seem that surprised."

Rei-sama prodded. Noriko-chan gave a small shake of her head.

"No, I'm surprised. I was just thinking that there probably were students at an all-girls school that couldn't get along with men, but not about Rosa Chinensis specifically. Ah, I see. Hanadera Academy's a boys school, so it'll be difficult for a man-hater to help out at their school festival."

That's exactly what it was.

"It's good that you're so smart, Noriko-chan."

"Really?"

It was indeed so. She had a composure that belied her young age. Enviably so.

Noriko-chan was cool. Which meant that coolness wasn't necessarily something that came with age. Thinking this, Yumi suffered a bit of a shock. Because it meant there was a possibility that she'd be just the same as she was now when she was a third-year.

"Oh, so then what happened last year? Rosa Chinensis would have been Rosa Chinensis en bouton at the time, right?"

Noriko-chan seemed confused.

"Last year, and the year before, she gave everyone the run-around and avoided going to the Hanadera school festival completely. Well, it was allowed because she was just a bouton."

"But this year."

"Exactly. She's Rosa Chinensis, so she has to be there. That's what Yumi-chan was thinking."

Rei-sama turned to her and said, "Go ahead." Yumi stood up and adopted an inspiring pose, her left hand on her hip and her right hand pointing up at the ceiling.

"I call it, "The epic campaign to subjugate man-hatred through gradual acclimatization because the shock of suddenly being thrown into a boys school would be too much.""

"Don't you think that campaign name's a bit too long?"

"... Ah, right. There's probably scope to change it."

Oh, she really was cool. That Noriko-chan.

"So you were planning on getting her accustomed to the Hanadera student council during the summer vacation?"

Shimako-san inquired.

"Right."

Yumi agreed, after sitting down.

"Sachiko-sama's fine with my younger brother for some reason. So I think her problem's a prejudice she can overcome with time. The previous Roses said that her man-hating wasn't something she was born with."

"So we take it slowly then?"

"I think Sachiko-sama will be fine if my brother's there, giving off "these people are safe" vibes."

"I see. That makes sense. Like how you don't jump into a hot bath, instead starting with a lukewarm one and steadily adding hot water until it heats up."

Yoshino-san murmured. Although her analogy was easy to understand, pairing Sachiko-sama's man-hatred with taking a bath seemed somehow wrong.

"I get what you're saying. So, what next? Where, and how, best to meet them? Yumi-chan, do you have any ideas on this?"

"Well, on that."

Yumi placed her index finger lightly on her cheek.

"I couldn't really think of a good place to meet."

The Yamayurikai would be meeting frequently throughout the second-half of the holidays to start preparing for the school festival. But, having said that, they'd have to get permission from the school to invite the boys of Hanadera onto their campus. Yuuki had said that they had a classroom they could use at Hanadera, but they'd have to use some kind of black magic to get the man-hating Sachiko-sama to go there.

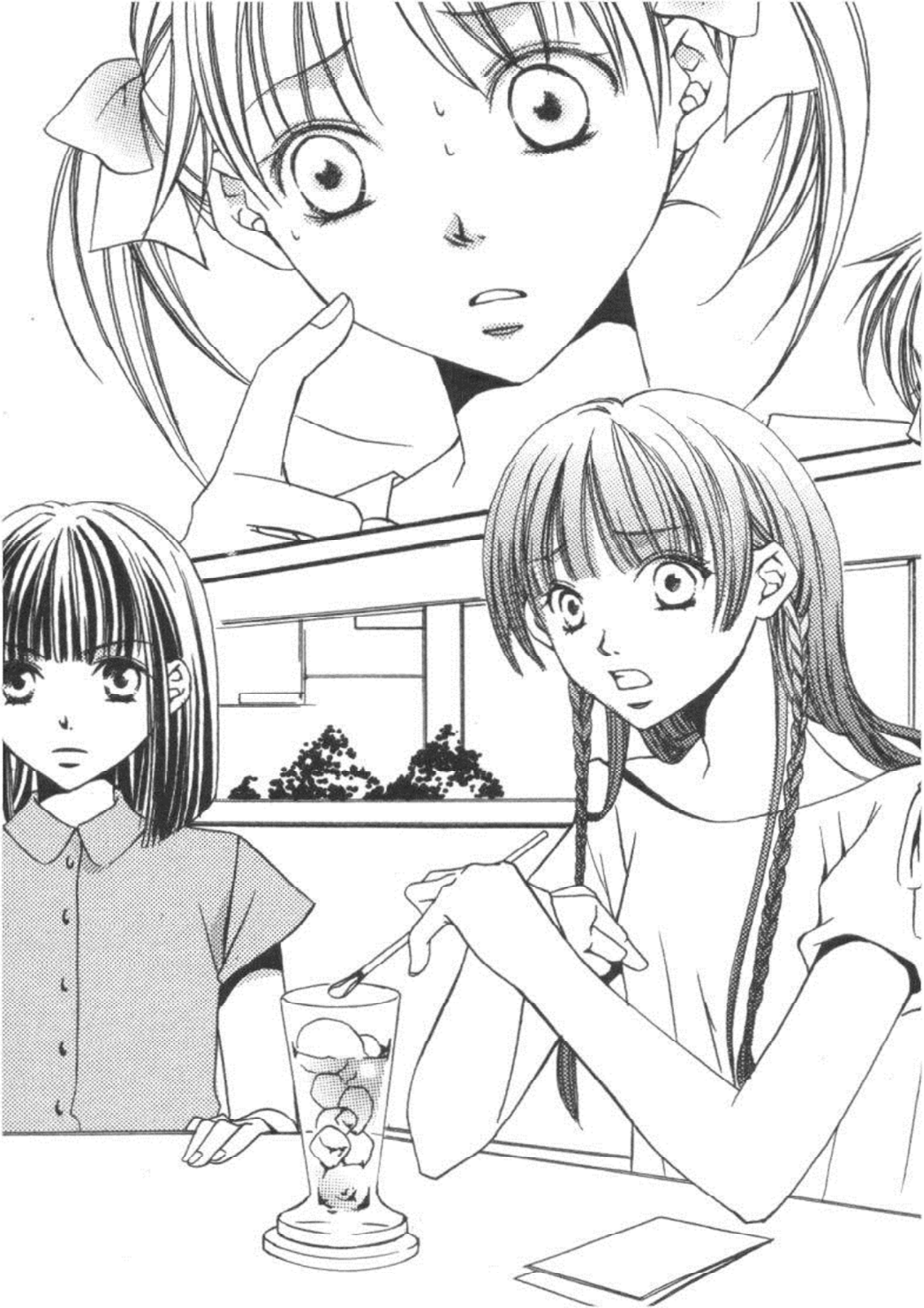
"Before we get to that, what are the odds of Sachiko-sama attending such a get together?"

"Ooh."

That Yoshino-san had hit on a sore spot. Indeed, if Sachiko-sama was willing to participate, then they'd have no need for the event they were planning.

"I wonder what we can do to ensure she's there."





"Ensure ... "

Rei-sama and the three second-years immediately thought of the one person who held Sachiko-sama in the palm of her hand, and could "ensure" that she would do something.

"Basically, what you're saying is, what would Youko-sama do?"

Then, the conclusion that everyone arrived at was:

"She'd order her."

"– Right."

She wouldn't use any underhanded tricks. Just a single sentence. "Sachiko. Be there." – Like that.

"But could anyone here order *Rosa Chinensis* to attend?"

Noriko-chan said, and everyone exchanged glances.

"I couldn't order her. Sachiko wouldn't listen to a word I said if she found it disagreeable. What do you think, *Rosa Gigantea*?"

Rei-sama said to Shimako-san.

"Of course I wouldn't be able to. While we are both Roses, I'm a grade below her. I couldn't order her."

Shimako-san shook her head too. Then everyone's gaze seemed to spontaneously turn to Yumi.

"Hold on a minute. I'm her *petit soeur*, there's no way I could order my onee-sama around."

What had they been expecting? That should have been obvious from a moment's thought.

"... I guess you're right. Even though Sachiko is completely smitten with Yumi-chan, their relationship is completely different to her one with Youko-sama."

Having concluded that not a single person there could imitate Youko-sama, they decided to explore alternate paths.

"Then what would Sei-sama or Eriko-sama do?"

"... Trick her?"

"That sounds about right."

Of course, Youko-sama could do that as well. Since they were the ones that had kept it a secret from Sachiko-sama that Kashiwagi-san was cast to play the prince in last year's school festival production of "Cinderella."

"Wait, let's not be hasty."

Shimako-san frowned when she heard, "Trick her." But Yoshino-san didn't back down.

"We'll hear no more from the White Rose pair. Your current happiness is proof that such drastic measures work."

Now she'd said it. There was no way that Shimako-san or Noriko-chan could respond. Because they were living proof, realizing a good outcome after being tricked by the other members of the Yamayurikai.

"If we pretend it's an accident, and run into them, then she won't be able to run away."

Rei-sama explained, moving water glasses around to represent Sachiko-sama and the Hanadera students. But then the waitress misinterpreted this as a request for refills, and poured ice water into the five glasses.

"But where? If it's in the street, she'll be able to run away. Besides, would we be able to manufacture a convenient accident? Sachiko-sama will find out if it's too unnatural, and that will just aggravate her further."

Yoshino-san rested her chin on her fingers and said, "Right."

"What about a cafe like this?"

Yumi suggested, not considering it too deeply. However.

"Wouldn't it be weird to call her out somewhere when we'll be constantly meeting each other at school anyway? And then the Hanadera boys just happen to be here? You don't have to be Sachiko-sama to see through that."

Immediately rejected.

"You're right. No matter how you look at it, it can't be somewhere unnatural. But does such a place exist?"

Noriko-chan, who had been abiding by the order for "silence," chose this moment to interject.

"What about Yumi-sama's house?"

"My house?"

"Well, it wouldn't be unnatural for your brother's friends to visit the Fukuzawa house, and it wouldn't seem odd if we met there either."

Indeed. It wouldn't seem strange that that the son's and daughter's friends just happened to be visiting on the same day. It wouldn't be strange, but –

"... My house? I don't mind, but it's a bit small."

Yumi quickly did the math.

Six people from the Yamayurikai, probably about the same from the Hanadera school council. Obviously, the ten or so people wouldn't be staying the night, but it was cramped when she pictured it.

"Then what about our dojo? It's fine as long as we pick a day when it's not being used."

"But Rei-chan, why would the Hanadera boys just happen to be there too?"

"Ah, you're right."

Rei-sama dropped the idea after Yoshino-san pointed this out. The seemingly simple task of choosing a location was turning out to be quite difficult.

"Wouldn't it be better if we all went to Sachiko's place?"

"Why would the Hanadera boys go there?"

"We could use Kashiwagi-san."

"Ah, I see."

At this point, Noriko-chan raised her hand to ask another question.

"Um, who's this Kashiwagi-san?"

"Ah, he's Sachiko's cousin and fiance. He's the former president of the Hanadera school council, and there's unconfirmed rumors that he's gay."

Rei-sama explained briefly, but thinking about it, it seems like a pretty difficult position for Sachiko-sama, doesn't it?

"So we make it seem like Kashiwagi-san's providing his juniors with a spacious meeting spot. Kashiwagi-san's mother's a member of the Ogasawara family, and his grandfather lives there too. I've heard he visits from time to time."

"Right."

Yumi agreed.

"That's the impression I got."

During their New Year's visit, it had seemed like Kashiwagi-san was infuriatingly familiar with the Ogasawara household.

"But will this Kashiwagi-san be willing to help us?"

Yoshino-san hadn't seen him since the school festival, so apparently she still thought of Kashiwagi-san as the wretched prince who reeked of ginkgo nuts. However.

"If I had to say, I think he'd help us ... but."

Yumi muttered.

"Why?"

Yoshino-san asked.

"Ah, well, no reason. To help out his juniors as a graduate of Hanadera. And because we're doing it for Sachiko-sama."

This wasn't good.

She'd almost let slip the words she remembered Kashiwagi-san saying – "Anytime you need help, Yumi-chan."

It wasn't like she was trying to hide it, but it was better to stay silent and avoid any strange misunderstandings. To begin with, Kashiwagi-san saw "Yumi-chan" as "Yukichi's older sister," so someone was bound to get the wrong idea.

Although Yumi was starting to get flustered, Yoshino-san didn't pursue that line of questioning any further. Nobody really seemed that interested in Kashiwagi-san.

"Oh, that's right. Sachiko knows your younger brother because Kashiwagi-san brought him along to New Year's at Sachiko's house, didn't he?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Well, that won't seem too out of the ordinary then."

There was unanimous agreement that they should follow that thread.

However.

Just before the meeting adjourned, Yumi was given some difficult homework by Rei-sama.

"Yumi-chan, we'll leave it to you to talk to Kashiwagi-san."

– How cruel.

# Cunning Boy

## Part 1.

The following day.

Standing before a huge wooden gate that looked like it belonged on the residence of a shogun's personal retainer, or an Edo-period town magistrate, the Fukuzawa siblings sighed.

"It's bigger than I thought."

"... Yeah."

"Still not quite as big as Sachiko-san's, but it sure beats any normal house."

"Right."

Of course, the lady of the house was originally a daughter of the powerful Ogasawara family, so it shouldn't have been hard to imagine that the family she married into would have a house like this. But, but, even taking that into account, the estate was incredibly large. Yumi was seriously considering calculating how many times the Fukuzawa house would fit inside the grounds.

In other words, this was the house where Kashiwagi-san lived.

In order to accomplish the task set for her by Rei-sama at the previous day's secret Yamayurikai meeting, they'd caught a bus, followed by a train, then another bus, and lastly a ten minute walk before finally arriving at this previously unseen plot of land.

Naturally, Yuuki had accompanied her. Not only had he been the instigator of all of this when he came to talk to her, but as the junior of the recently graduated Hanadera student Kashiwagi-san, his position was easily understood.

"I want to go home."

"Me too."

It was hot.



Despite the parasol, her shoulders, arms, and other parts not covered by the summer dress were stinging.

2pm. The hottest part of the day.

They spent about five minutes looking up at the gates. Although they'd arranged to meet him, they didn't have to see Kashiwagi-san to know that their mission was over. Even without talking to him, just seeing this place was enough to make it obvious that they'd have to change their plans.

"Hey."

"Yeah."

They should find a public telephone and let him know they couldn't make it. Yuuki and Yumi looked at each other and with a silent understanding they turned around.

Just at that point.

"That's not nice, Fukuzawa siblings."

A voice came from behind them.

"After coming all this way, you're going to go home without saying hello?"

They didn't have to turn around to know. That immediately soothing voice. With a bit of a host's spice. Plus the occasional undercurrent of poison.

There was no doubting it was him, the ginkgo nut prince, Kashiwagi Suguru.

"If I'm not mistaken, that box contains a Maple Parlor fruit jelly selection. They're my favorite, don't you know. As good as a nice gin and tonic. Ahh, I wish I had one. If only someone would drop by, bringing some with them."

Would anyone be able to run away after hearing all that? Like rewinding a video, the Fukuzawa siblings spun around, returning to their original position.

"Go-gokigenyou, Kashiwagi-san."

"Hey there, Kashiwagi-sempai. Sorry about coming to see you on such short notice."

The blameless Maple Parlor box was handed over with a forced smile. Kashiwagi-san looked eminently satisfied as he accepted it and said:

"Ah, such good children. I'm glad you're so honest."

Then he suddenly patted them on the heads, but they didn't have the energy to fight back. Honestly, how long had he been waiting by the gate? Either way, it was a devastating defeat for the Fukuzawas, whose actions had been completely read by Kashiwagi-san.

"Come on, come inside you two."

Naturally, Kashiwagi-san wasn't going to dismiss them now that he'd received the fruit jellies. He took Yuuki by the arm and, just like that, dragged him inside. It was really aggravating, the way he calculated that Yumi's concern for her younger brother's body would pull her in too.

Once inside the gate, it felt a lot cooler than out on the road, due to the shade from the bamboo grass, pine trees and other plants.

The entrance was at the end of the stone path that went straight from the gate. The main door was huge, and the front step was high, so, in a word it looked like a ryokan, or maybe a traditional restaurant.

"Come on Yumi-chan, you too."

"Pardon the intrusion."

"Ah, you don't have to take off your shoes."

Even if he said that, it was a basic courtesy.

Yumi turned around to place her shoes off to the side. Just as she was bending over, a voice suddenly came from behind her.

"Welcome."

"Eek."

She barely managed to avoid hitting her head on the stone pavement. She turned around in surprise and saw that an older lady had arrived at some point.

"—!"

This time nothing came out as Yumi's heart once again jumped in her chest. It was scary to theorize about the kneeling, white kimono-clad woman that had appeared in the dimly lit room.

"My junior from high-school, Fukuzawa-kun, and his older sister. Yumi-san is Sacchan's junior."

They hastily bowed at Kashiwagi-san's eloquent introduction. Immediately, she put herself on guard, thinking "Is this Kashiwagi-san's mother!?" But she seemed a little bit old, and from listening to their conversation it looked as though that thought was incorrect.

"Leave us be, Tomi. I'll entertain them."

"Very well, as you wish."

So apparently she was neither a ghost, nor his mother, but a household maid. Although, at the moment, Yumi wasn't concerned about who that lady was.

(Argh, I said, "Eek." I said, "Eek." What do I do?)

Yumi's spirits continued to fall as they walked through the hallway. And Kashiwagi-san was Kashiwagi-san. In her mind, she unjustly resented him. By introducing her as Sachiko-sama's junior, hadn't he troubled Sachiko-sama? But that was typical of Kashiwagi-san.

"What's the matter, Yumi-chan? Your face is all red, is it too hot?"

He called out to her. As though he hadn't heard her earlier squeal.

"No, it's nice and cool."

Actually, the inside of the house was pleasantly cool. Despite the traditional architecture, it also looked somewhat new.

Just like the front gates, the interior was also as spacious as a ryokan. To make matters worse, the corridor was long and had many twists and turns, making the grounds like a maze.

How would they be able to get out of their on their own when it came time to leave? Instinctively, Yumi grabbed hold of Yuuki's shirt. He had a much better sense of direction.

"While I don't have a problem with my room, it is still a bedroom, so I thought it inappropriate to bring a young lady in there."

Kashiwagi-san said, leading them to a small, detached, traditional Japanese-style room.

"So it would be appropriate to take a young gentleman there?"

Yumi joked, unable to let his statement go without comment.

"Mm. Right. If Yuuki were here by himself, I suppose I'd take him to my room."

Kashiwagi-san responded, smiling.

"I wouldn't come here alone."

Yuuki scowled.

"Don't say that, come any time. I'll show you the utmost hospitality."

Even though it was just idle chatter, it made her nervous. Because Kashiwagi-san hadn't taken the joke as a joke. Instead, he had taken her joke at face value.

"Is this a tearoom?"

Yumi asked, after taking a look around.

"Yeah. Ah, right. I could prepare tea, if you'd like. But it probably won't go with the fruit jellies."

"No, that's alright."

Yumi and Yuuki simultaneously declined, but Kashiwagi-san had already started getting the tea ceremony utensils out.

"It's a pain, so I'll use the hot water from the pot. But don't copy what I'm doing."

Don't copy. The Fukuzawa siblings looked at each other. They'd never conducted a full-blown tea ceremony so far in their lives, and didn't intend to do so in the future either.

"Come on, don't just stand there, have a seat."

At Kashiwagi-san's urging, they sat down in the guests' seats. Although they weren't really sure which seats in the tearoom were the guests' seats, and which were the hosts' seats.

Whush, whush, whush, whush.

The sound of the tea whisk was soothing. As she was watching this, Yumi thought, "The tea ceremony's kind of nice." Then Kashiwagi-san stopped what he was doing, stood up opened a small cupboard in the alcove.

Surprisingly, it was refrigerated inside and Kashiwagi-san took out ice and cold water before closing the door as though nothing had happened.

"It's inelegant when you see it, right? But it would be most inconvenient if it wasn't there."

So that meant that an air-conditioner was probably hidden somewhere out of sight too. It had been bugging her for a while now as to why the room was still so cool despite being all closed off.

Kashiwagi-san poured the tea he'd just whisked into the glasses he'd put ice in, then diluted it with water.

"Here, drink up."

The iced green-tea he offered them was surprisingly tasty, but Yumi honestly thought she could have done without seeing how it was made.

"Now then."

His hosting duties fulfilled, Kashiwagi-san spoke smoothly as he opened the box of jellies that they'd brought for him.

"What is it that you want me to do?"

As though he were asking, "Which would you prefer, peach or pineapple?"

(– Ahh, really.)

He's a cunning boy, that Kashiwagi-san.

## Part 2.

"Hmm. Is Sacchan's man-hatred really that serious?"

Kashiwagi-san said, after listening to their summary of the situation. And after finishing off one of the grape jellies.

"Yeah."

Showing zero awareness of the cause of this malady. Such a problematic person.

"Then I suppose she won't be able to bear any children. What will the Ogasawara family do, I wonder."

"Huh."

The comeback, "You're worried about that?" immediately came to mind. But more than that, why wasn't he concerned about Sachiko-sama's mental health? Yumi was utterly shocked that he was completely unruffled by what she had said, proving that he really was "that kind of man."

"Sacchan and I are grandfather Ogasawara's only grandchildren. Well, he could have an illegitimate child that I'm not aware of somewhere. In that case, it's a different story. But, well, it's a trifling matter ... "

Hey, hey, should you really be trying to suppress a laugh while discussing a topic that serious? Yuuki opened his mouth, losing his temper at that attitude.

"Hey sempai, are you really going to marry Sachiko-san?"

"Oh, Yukichi. Feeling jealous?"

Kashiwagi-san grinned effeminately. Naturally, Yuuki just looked blatantly fed up with him.

"It's always a party in your mind, isn't it? I worry for Sachiko-san."

"For Sacchan?"

"You should cancel the engagement if you can't make her happy. Don't you feel sorry for her?"

Oh, well put, younger brother. Yumi mentally gave him a round of applause.

"Hmm. That's quite a thing to say. So will you live up to your words and bring her happiness? It doesn't bother me, so if you bow your cute head and ask, I suppose I'll be forced to relinquish my precious Sacchan to you, Yukichi."

"H-how did you get that impression?"

He'd only been trying to protect Sachiko-sama, so Yuuki's face went bright red in indignation at being forcibly paired with her. Naturally, Yumi couldn't agree with that idea either. She loved her onee-sama, and her younger brother was cute. But having the two become lovers was a bit hard to swallow. She couldn't really understand her own feelings right now. About all she could say was that something unpleasant was still something unpleasant, no matter how it was said.

"Well, you and I are the only young men that Sacchan's okay with. Although she's surprisingly good with older men, and younger kids that haven't started school yet."

Listening to this, Yumi thought that Kashiwagi-san's examples were all missing the mark. The men that Sachiko-sama was okay with were all completely out of the question, weren't they?

To begin with, the reason she was fine around Yuuki was probably because of the sense of security provided by his biological older sister. In Kashiwagi-san's case, his excessive charm, or rather her current disillusionment with him, had led to Sachiko-sama downgrading him from someone she admired to just another relative. Of course, she wouldn't hate the elderly or infants because she wouldn't see them as "men."

"I would completely spoil Yukichi and Sacchan's children. Ah, Yukichi. Don't worry, I'd still take control of the Ogasawara Group. So all you'd have to do is provide the kids, what do you say?"

There he goes again.

Kashiwagi-san could appear completely idiotic from time to time. Even though he must have been really smart, since he was given priority entry into



Hanadera University. There's a fine line between genius and insanity, or so the saying goes.

"So, that was it? All I have to do is take the members of the Hanadera Academy high school student council around to the Ogasawara estate?"

"... That's what we'd thought, but there's no need now."

Kashiwagi-san seemed willing, but Yumi politely declined.

"Oh, why not?"

"Because, we needed you to have the noble goal of "providing your juniors with enough space." But since you live in a house this big, there's no reason for you to use the Ogasawara estate."

Sachiko-sama would obviously know what sort of house her cousin lived in. They'd be in trouble when she asked why he didn't just use his own house, because they'd have no good answer.

"Hmm. How boring."

Kashiwagi-san seemed monumentally bored as he crunched on the ice from his iced green tea. Following that, the sliding door silently opened.

"Pardon me."

"Uwah."

Yuuki's voice was the first to rise in consternation. And with good reason. Even though the tearoom was separated from the main building, there had been no sound of footsteps along the path, no sign of another human, no indication that the door was about to be opened whatsoever.

"Welcome."

The politely bowing head slowly raised, and when Yumi saw who it was this time she let out an "Ah." Those ringlets like stiff springs belonged to –

"Touko-chan."

"Gokigenyou. I thought it was you, Yumi-sama. I came to offer my greetings because I heard that one of Sachiko onee-sama's juniors was visiting, and I thought it may have been you."

Touko-chan slipped inside, closed the sliding door, then placed a tray in the center of the room. It held a jug of barley tea, as well as one, two, three,

four glasses ... It looked as though Touko-chan had included herself in the numbers, as though it were the natural thing to do.

"Umm ... and this is?"

Touko-chan shifted her gaze to Yuuki.

"Ah, my younger brother Yuuki. A second-year at Hanadera Academy's high school."

Introducing her younger brother felt embarrassing, or at least a little strange. But, as a wind to cool that feeling that arose inside her, Touko-chan was in her "good girl" mode, and smiled sweetly at Yuuki.

"A pleasure to meet you. I'm Matsudaira Touko, currently a first-year high school student at Lillian's Girls Academy. Yumi-sama is always guiding me gently."

"Same here, thanks for looking after my sister."

Smooth. Too smooth. Boy meets girl. Like a scene from a teen movie.

"Touko-chan is Kashiwagi-san's cousin ... right?"

"Correct."

Touko-chan nodded. Yumi hadn't been sure, because she'd never formally confirmed it, but thankfully it looked like she was correct. Nor was she completely clear on how Sachiko-sama was related to Touko-chan, but, basically, they were both Kashiwagi-san's cousins.

"My mother's from the Kashiwagi family, so we often come to visit."

So that was it. Well, it wasn't as though Yumi had thought that Touko-chan and Kashiwagi-san lived together.

"Touko. Why are you here? I told Tomi to leave us be."

Kashiwagi-san said. Apparently he hadn't been expecting Touko-chan to make an appearance either.

"Well, she told me to come and have a look. Telling her to leave you be just made her all the more interested."

"She was wondering what I was doing taking a young boy and girl to a secluded spot?"

"Exactly. You're not trustworthy, onii-sama."

Touko-chan chortled. Then, while still laughing, she whispered:

"So, what are you three conspiring about?"

"C-conspiring?"

Yumi quickly shook her head and waved her hands, denying they were doing anything so disreputable.

"Oh, am I mistaken? But isn't it natural to assume that Yumi-sama had some reason for coming all the way here to visit Suguru onii-sama?"

"Touko-chan. Well, you see, my brother had some business with Kashiwagi-san, so ... um, I'm here as a sort of chaperone."

Flustered. However, Touko-chan wasn't paying any attention to Yumi's inarticulate explanation.

"In summary ... it's about Sachiko onee-sama, I presume?"

"Touko-chan."

Suddenly hitting the bulls-eye. Ah, what to do? It would be curtains for sure if she told Sachiko-sama. Yumi was desperate, having been backed into a corner. Just then.

"Ah-hahahaha."

Kashiwagi-san laughed raucously.

"Haha, good, that's good Yumi-chan."

"What is?"

Glare. She was already on the edge, having been backed into a corner. Why was she being subjected to this roar of laughter?

"That face."

"My face?"

"That face of yours that shows what you're thinking as clear as day. It's the best."

Kashiwagi-san wiped away his tears. Wasn't it rude to laugh at someone's face, especially a woman's?

"Yukichi's funny too, but you've got your own special flavor, Yumi-chan."

— so that was it. Having heard that, she lost all will to protest.

"Well, whatever."

Even Touko-chan shrugged in amazement at Kashiwagi-san's convulsive laughter.

"I don't have the spare time to engage in idle gossip, so I won't mention that I happened to meet you here, Yumi-sama. Rest assured."

"... Thanks for that."

Yumi wasn't too sure how to take that, but she decided to accept it at face value for now.

## Part 3.

"Come and visit again, Yukichi."

Kashiwagi-san grinned as he spoke, having faithfully led them back through the maze of hallways to the magnificent front gate.

"I don't think I'll be back here again."

Yuuki muttered, scowling. Well, yeah. Since Kashiwagi-san had said he'd show him his bedroom next time, it was only natural that Yuuki would keep his distance, sensing the danger to his body.

"So harsh."

Not having learned from this, Kashiwagi-san turned to face Yumi as he spoke.

"But in that case, I wonder if Yumi-chan will come and visit me by herself."

If you want to hit the general, aim for his horse first, huh?

"I too shall refrain."

It was kind of depressing that she was the horse her younger brother was riding.

"Hmm. But you two will be back some day."

"What on earth makes you think that?"

"Nothing. Just a premonition."

"You're sure it's not a curse?"

"Hahaha. Yes, it may well be."

Apparently satisfied by offering this ominous prediction, Kashiwagi-san waved them goodbye, saying, "Take care."

Somehow, they'd spent close to three hours at Kashiwagi-san's house. The time really did fly.

In the end, Touko-chan had remained with them the entire time, so they hadn't been able to discuss the meeting between the Hanadera and Lillian's school councils, dubbed the "Epic campaign to subjugate man-hatred," or, for short, "Operation OK (Tentative)."

It looked as though they wouldn't be able to use the idea of barging into Sachiko-sama's house, although they hadn't needed to talk to Kashiwagi-san to establish that.

As for the interloper Touko-chan, she'd silently disappeared while Yumi and Yuuki were preparing to leave. Just what on earth had she been hoping to achieve anyway?

Fatigue swiftly descended on Yumi as she walked side-by-side with Yuuki to the bus stop.

All that effort gone to waste.

Why on earth had they come to visit Kashiwagi-san? And how could they fix their plans now?

"It was her? That caused your fight with Sachiko-san?"

Yuuki asked as they walked.

"Is that what I told you?"

During the rainy season, Yumi and Sachiko-sama hadn't been able to connect with each other. But she couldn't really remember talking about it at home.

"You never actually said it, but that was the feeling I got when I saw you together."

"Well, you know, I had no idea about the sort of things you suffer through at school. You never let on about those."

Yumi bit back and Yuuki smiled bitterly.

"The things I suffer through? That's horrible."

"But."

I'm worried about you. She couldn't get the words out of her mouth, but Yuuki seemed to understand all the same, responding with, "Don't worry, I'm fine."

When they arrived at the bus stop, Yuuki had a look at the schedule, then his watch, before informing her that they'd just missed a bus. Supporting that was the fact that they were the only two people in sight.

They idly watched the other cars driving past the bus stop.

The area around them was brightly lit, with just the air telling them it was twilight. All the people in the cars seemed so eager to get home that they were probably pushing the speed limit.

Yumi casually muttered:

"I wonder if Touko-chan really won't say something to Sachiko-sama."

In response to that, Yuuki said:

"She won't."

"How do you know?"

"Just a feeling. She said she wouldn't, so I'll trust her."

"I suppose, she did say that."

Yumi nodded. Rather than trusting in Touko-chan, she trusted in her brother's trust of Touko-chan.

And then.

"She's kinda cute."

Yuuki said smoothly.

"Cute!?"

So that was his type? Yumi looked at her brother with surprise and a bit of recrimination.

"I don't mean the way she looks."

Yuuki calmly corrected himself. His response was completely different than when Kashiwagi-san had mocked him about Sachiko-sama.

"Then how?"

"Let's see."

Looking up and off to the side, Yuuki explained.

"When you see a kindergartener, you think, 'How cute,' right? It's something like that."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know."

"So basically, you're just saying that she's younger than you?"

"I don't think that's all it is ... it's alright, you don't have to understand. I don't think I could really explain it to anyone myself."



"Hmm."

She sort of understood, but didn't really. But that was fine. Since Yuuki had said she didn't have to understand.

"Hey, Yuuki, what is your type?"

Yumi asked impulsively, suddenly wanting to know.

"My type ... you mean my preference in girls?"

"Obviously."

Just for confirmation, for confirmation. To make sure he hadn't picked up any strange habits after going to an all-boys school for such a long time.

"Umm. Having your preferences heard and judged by your older sister is a bit embarrassing, don't you think?"

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Her brother really did seem quite delicate, the way he shyly turned away, but Yumi continued to badger him with questions.

"Well, specifically, what kind of figure do you like?"

"Their appearance doesn't really matter to me. Their personality's more important ... gentle girls are nice."



"Huh."

Then he's probably picturing someone a bit different to Yoshino-san or Touko-chan. Of the Yamayurikai members, Shimako-san was probably the closest.

"Someone who's lively and cheerful."

Lively ... lively? Then maybe he'd prefer someone like Rei-sama. But Yuuki and Rei-sama didn't seem like they would match each other at all. No matter how she pictured it, she couldn't see anything happening between the two of them.

"What about you?"

This time Yuuki went on the counterattack.

"Me?"

Damn. She'd never given any serious thought to how her ideal man should be.

But since she'd been the one to start this conversation, and she'd already heard what her brother had to say, there was no way she could stay silent now. Yumi worked out her type at super-express speeds.

"Well. Someone who's good looking, smart, and their personality seems twisted at first glance but they've actually got a kind heart, who's fastidious –"

Was where she got to when:

"That's enough, Yumi."

Yuuki stopped her as she was counting these out on her fingers.

"You're just describing Sachiko-san."

She really had been going to an all-girls school for a long time. – A sigh of exasperation escaped from her younger brother standing next to her.

# OK, Let's Do It

## Part 1.

Her younger brother's friend grumbled that the word "man" wasn't just a synonym for "bad-guy."

"You say it's "man-hatred," but every person is different, so we probably have to analyze the cause of those feelings. But let's set that aside for now. Basically, we've got this problem because she's arrived at the formula "man equals hated.""

"The formula?"

Yumi asked for clarification.

"Well, it could be a symbol or a diagram, however you want to put it. Basically, it's a convention. As an example – Yumi-san."

"Yes."

"Two by two."

"Four."

"Nine by seven."

"Sixty-three."

"Right?"

"Huh?"

She had no idea how being asked to do multiplication problems followed by the comment, "Right?" was supposed to explain anything.

"Two by two is four. You said it immediately. You didn't have to think about it, or count 2 twice, right?"

"Yeah, that's true."

It was more obvious for  $9 \times 7$  than  $2 \times 2$ . She hadn't summed 9 together 7 times. She just used the answer she'd memorized from the multiplication table back in elementary school.

"It's like that."

He cracked his knuckles.

"I don't know specifically what caused Yumi-san's onee-sama, Sachiko-sama, to feel this way, but we can deduce that it came about after a number of instances of hating specific men. Assuming it's not an allergy she was born with."

"Yeah."

The young Sachiko-sama's heart had been wounded by her grandfather and father keeping numerous mistresses.

Her cousin and arranged fiancé was kind and neat, but despite the expectations she had of him, one day he suddenly announced to her that he was homosexual.

"Ah, so that's it. Just hearing the word "man" is enough to light up the "hate" sign inside Sachiko-sama. Is that what you're saying?"

"Exactly. Even though there are all different types of men in the world. Ah, there's a wide variety at Hanadera, so if it would be of help to you Yumi-san, please come and have a look. We'd really like it if you came to visit."

Then Yuuki entered the room carrying a tray of barley tea and cleared his throat.

"Hey, Kobayashi. Quit hitting on my sister."

"Ooh, have you got a thing for your sister, Yukichi?"

"— As if. If you've got free time to waste chatting with her, then go back to my room and do some English study. Or, what? Have you finished it already? In that case, hurry up and go home. I don't really remember inviting you here anyway."

"Don't say such cruel things, Yukichi. This room is heaven, that one is hell. I was getting dizzy, so it's only natural she'd invite me in."

Kobayashi-kun snuggled into Yuuki. He'd shown up at the Fukuzawa house today without calling ahead, so hadn't known that the air-con in his friend's room wasn't working, making him a truly idiotic, or unfortunate, visitor.

Even with the window open and an electric fan blowing, it could only be a mid-summer afternoon.

"I don't mind, Yuuki. Why not take a break and cool off in here? Kobayashi-kun and I were in the middle of a really interesting discussion."

"Ah, you're so kind, Yumi-san. I wish I was born as Yumi-san's brother."

Kobayashi-kun smiled happily and crossed his arms across his chest, like he was making a pose from the children's song, "Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree." Even though he was the same age as her younger brother, the real one.

"He'll take advantage of you if you spoil him, Yumi."

"But if he does, you'll stop him even if it means coming to blows, right Yuuki?"

"If I have to."

Quite the authoritative attitude from Yuuki. He seemed pleased as he plopped himself down, probably happy to be relied upon. Plus he'd chosen a spot directly in line with the air-con. He was like a cat, the way he expertly found the coolest spot.

"So, getting back to what we were talking about."

After downing roughly half his barley tea in a single gulp, Kobayashi-kun resumed their earlier conversation.

"I think the fact that Sachiko-sama's fine with Yukichi is a really positive sign for her."

"How so?"

"He's an unrelated young man. For a man-hater, he should be one of the things she hates most of all. But Sachiko-sama's got to the point where she's fine with him, even if he does benefit from being your brother, and having an identical face to yours. Her formula that "man equals hated" is already starting to fall down. This gives us a chance. Let's bring it down in one fell swoop, like the Berlin wall. From the Lillian's side and the Hanadera side."

"Kobayashi-kun ... you may be on to something."

"Thank-you. I'm so happy."

"Yumi, don't be mistaken. All he can do is math. Basically, he loves equations."

"Ah, is that it."

From today, she knew that he was no good at English at least. Because if he was, he wouldn't have gone to the expense of visiting his friend's house to look at their vocabulary book.

"But how do we break them down? Sachiko-sama's walls are tall and strong, like a castle."

"Getting it down in one go might be tough, but if we keep attacking I'm sure it will work out well."

"Keep on attacking ..."

"We just keep piling up the accomplishments. Even if they're individually quite small. For example."

Kobayashi-san spoke cheerfully.

"We don't just have gays at our school, we also have traps."

"\_"

He could even state that clearly and openly. So then, it sounded like there were a number of homosexuals scattered throughout Hanadera. Yumi hadn't really believed that the school her younger brother attended was like that. She wanted to cover her ears and block it out.

Kobayashi-kun had completely forgotten that in front of him was a young lady who had been raised in a sheltered greenhouse, and also missed that Yumi had taken a step backwards, as he kept pushing, pushing, pushing onwards.

"With the body of a man, but the heart of a woman. About average in terms of cuteness, but in plain clothes they look like female high school students. What do you think about that?"

"What do I think?"

How could she possibly comment on that?

"Do you think Sachiko-sama would be able to converse normally with someone that's not a manly-man?"

"We-ll."

Seeing that Yumi was in trouble, Yuuki jumped in to the conversation.

"But still, Kobayashi. Even if Sachiko-san's not aware they they're male, she might just reject them outright anyway."

"Huh, but that's just discrimination."

"Before we get into discrimination, if she rejects them on instinct then it's not something we can do much about, is it?"

"Well, that's true."

The heart of a girl, in girls clothes, but with the body, and of course birth-certificate, of a boy?

What about that?

Yumi wasn't that opposed to it. There were all types of people in the world. But it would be more complicated for Sachiko-sama, since it would be affected by her man-hatred.

"Then how about this ace I've been keeping up my sleeve?"

"What ace?"

"The plan goes like this: Kobayashi-kun wants to be friends with Sachiko-sama. But Sachiko-sama won't talk to him, because she's afraid of him just because he's a man. So then Kobayashi-kun talks to his friend. His friend advises him, saying, "I'll be the bad-guy and start a fight with Sachiko-sama, then you come and rescue her." Kobayashi-kun rescues Sachiko-sama from the scary man, and Sachiko-sama's so grateful she invites him to have tea with her, and that's the start of their relationship."

As they listened to Kobayashi-kun speak, Yumi and Yuuki looked at each other. Because.

"That's just the story of **"The Red Ogre Who Cried,"** isn't it?"

"Oh, you know it?"

Well, it is a really famous children's book, isn't it? There should still be a copy in the Fukuzawa household from when they were kids. If they looked, they'd probably find it somewhere. Since it was one of their mother's favorite stories.

"That's way too lame. For one thing, who's going to play the bad-guy blue ogre? You stuff that up and she'll call the cops."



"Ah, right."

When Yuuki pressed him, saying, "Will you do it?," Kobayashi-kun immediately withdrew the plan. For someone with an ace up their sleeve, he sure folded quickly.

"I guess we should go with accidentally meeting somewhere. Yumi-san, are there plans for your student council members to meet any time soon?"

"Well."

From tomorrow, they planned to meet every day, but they were meeting at school.

They could always run into each other near the train station and then segue into one of the fast-food places or restaurants, but in that case they'd have to go without Rei-sama and Yoshino-san, since those two walked home.

But it would be tough to do it without Rei-sama there to talk to Sachiko-sama as an equal. Because if the Hanadera student council invited them to have tea, then Sachiko-sama would likely use her position as the only Lillian's third-year to unilaterally decline their offer. But if Rei-sama was there, and they discussed it between the two of them, then their chances of getting Sachiko-sama to agree would likely improve.

"I understand. Then how about this?"

After listening to her explanation, Kobayashi-kun clapped his hands together.

"We'll wait outside Lillian's front gate, then we'll call out to the Yamayurikai members when they appear. If Sachiko-sama agrees, we'll all get on the bus and go to M or K station together. That way, Rei-sama will be there and she and Yoshino-san can come along too."

"Will the Hanadera student council be okay with that?"

"Yeah. Everyone's really pumped about meeting the Yamayurikai members. We'll knock down any obstacles in our way."

"Really pumped – "

That was one of those slightly troubling phrases.

"Please tell everyone that they absolutely cannot make a pass at Sachiko-sama. If her man-hatred really flares up, we won't be able to assist at the Hanadera school festival."

"Don't worry. All the guys know she's an unattainable flower, a princess that we can only watch from a distance."

"Really? ... Okay, that's fine."

"Lastly, if you could let us know approximately what time you expect to finish your meeting on the agreed upon date. Does that sound reasonable to you?"

With Kobayashi-kun leading the discussion, it was settled surprisingly easily. It seemed ludicrous that they hadn't been able to come up with this plan on their way home from Kashiwagi-san's house.

"Alright. I'll talk with Rei-sama then let you know, Kobayashi-kun."

Yumi answered, and Kobayashi-kun suddenly burst into laughter. Yumi thought it was strange, since she didn't understand what he was laughing at, but then her eyes met Yuuki's and he didn't have to speak to say, "Dummy."

"Ah, right, I guess I could just tell Yuuki."

She didn't have to call anyone, she lived in the same house as a member of the Hanadera Academy's high school student council.

"Geez, you really are as dense as ever."

Two hours after their conversation finished, the electrician finally arrived and fixed the air-con in Yuuki's room.

## Part 2.

The day they agreed upon was the third Wednesday in August.

There was no deep meaning behind it, but there were a number of minor reasons.

For instance.

While the Yamayurikai members would be going to school starting from the second week of August, running into each other straight away would be a bit too abrupt, so they'd established a one week grace period during which they could observe Sachiko-sama's condition.

Plus they chose a day which wouldn't clash with Rei-sama and Yoshino-san's kendo club activities.

Furthermore, they'd tentatively ruled out Friday and Saturday, since they expected the streets to be busy (and they weren't meeting on Sundays, since they didn't go to school then during the semester).

""Yo, Sachiko-san. Fancy meeting you here. If you'd like, why don't we have some tea? What luck, all our student council members are here too.""

"— You're a terrible actor. It sounds like you're speed-reading the fine-print at the end of an ad."

Yumi was sitting on the living room sofa, critiquing her brother's rehearsal.

"You say that, but there's a lot of information I've got to get across in a short time, so what else can I do? Anyway, would I really start with "Yo, Sachiko-san," when you're there, Yumi? How about something like, "Hey, Yumi." "What is it, Yuuki? What are you up to?" "Oh, nothing, just meeting with the student council." "Same here." "Oh, really? We were just about to head to a restaurant, why don't you join us?" "Oh yeah, let's go."? That's more like a typical conversation."

"Mmm."

Her brother had a point.

"Alright, let's go with that. But when you're giving the invitation, look at Sachiko-sama and say, "Would you like to accompany us?""

"Okay."

Yuuki used a red pen to make some more amendments to the text in the notebook. It was the script for their meeting that Kobayashi-kun had scrawled in his messy handwriting.

It was approximately five hours before the big event. The Fukuzawa children were quite earnest, so they were devoting themselves to this final run-through right up until when Yumi had to leave.

They were so enthusiastic about it that the question of whether or not they should be changing the script at this late hour never crossed their minds.

"Oh? Which school festival is this play for?"

Their mom asked, poking her head out of the kitchen. Surprised, they both responded immediately.

"Lillian's."

"Hanadera's."

The two siblings were both alike in that they both blamed the other's school. Yumi hadn't intended to deceive her mother, but it was hard to tell someone who didn't know about Sachiko-sama's situation that they were doing this to trick her, because it wouldn't reflect well on her. Even if she did explain everything from the beginning, they probably wouldn't have understood anyway.

"Yumi-chan says Hanadera and Yuuki says Lillian's. Just which one is it?"

Naturally, their mom was looking at them skeptically.

"When you say which one ... well, it's more of a collaboration, there hasn't been a final decision yet, so we thought we'd just try practicing some temporary lines."

Sorry mom. But, in the broadest sense, it wasn't a lie.

"Oh, really? I'm looking forward to it."

Their mom laughed as she wiped the soap foam from the palm of her left hand onto her apron.

"Because this year, no matter what, I'll be going to Lillian's school festival. Cry and howl all you want, Yumi-chan. Naturally, your dad will be there too."

"Oowah."

"Since Yuuki's also going to be in the Yamayurikai play this year."

"... Maybe. What's the Yamayurikai doing? A play?"

Having just been drafted, Yuuki turned to Yumi.

"Probably. It seems they do that every year."

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama had been secretly planning something, and from what she could gather it was all related to a stage play.

"What, you haven't asked about it? What the hell have you been doing all this time when you've been going to school during the summer holidays?"

"There's still a mountain of work to do that's not related to our performance."

Yumi counterattacked against her brother's abuse by sticking out her tongue.

"But I'll find out for you. Or isn't the Hanadera student council going to help out this year?"

"We'll be there. Our student council's presence has been requested."

"But you haven't been told why."

"Yeah."

"It's because your Hanadera school festival is sooner."

"But we're not putting on a play so it's fine."

When Yuuki thumped the sofa with the notebook, mom threw the washcloth she had on her apron in between them.

"What are you two doing, acting like little kids. You're in high school, so if you're going to have a sibling fight be a bit more smart about it."

Seemingly shocked by the heat of their dispute, their mom shrugged and withdrew to the kitchen.

"A sibling fight, she said."

"Yeah."

They looked at each other. Indeed, they may have got a bit worked up.

The heat had gone out as soon as their mom had left, and Yuuki muttered in a subdued manner:

"So we'll be doing a play at Lillian's ... it'll be tough if we have to do something like Kashiwagi-sempai last year."

Playing a prince, dancing with girls. – Well, it seems like most high school boys should be able to do something embarrassing like that. But those who liked it, like Kashiwagi-san, were probably in the minority.

"Don't worry about it. Last year there was only Kashiwagi-san, but this time the underlings like you will probably just be one in a crowd."

"Underling" and "one in a crowd" probably weren't the right words to use, but at any rate, Yumi was trying her best to cheer her younger brother up.

"I suppose. All we can do is pray to Maria-sama that it turns out like that."

Yuuki looked up at the ceiling, placing his hands together in prayer.

"Oh, not to Buddha?"

"No. It has to be Maria-sama in this case."

"Alright. I'll pray to Maria-sama for you today then."

"Please do."

Even though he was going to a Buddhist school. Yumi couldn't stop herself from smiling at this. But still, she had to pray for it earnestly.

So she decided to leave the house a bit early this morning, although not just because of that.

She gently smoothed the pleats of her skirt that had been crumpled when she was sitting. It really was tough wearing her school uniform and having to go to school today despite it not being a school day. On top of that, the Lillian's uniform was black, so it absorbed the sunlight. Even though the material was lighter and the sleeves were shorter, it was still hot.

"Thanks for the help."

Yuuki was planning on leaving a bit after her, but apparently he was okay in plain clothes. That must be one of the differences between a boy's school and a girl's school. It felt a bit unfair.

"Well, see you."

"Ah, I hope it goes well."

"Yeah."

At the entrance, they gave each other a thumbs-up.

"I'm heading out."

Yumi cheerfully called out after putting on her shoes. Her mother came out to see her off, and seemed astonished by their behavior.

"What, you've made up already?"

They had indeed.

Yumi opened the door and leapt into the midsummer sunlight.

Because, like Kobayashi-kun had noted, the Fukuzawa siblings had a good relationship with each other.

## Part 3.

Luckily, the bus arrived just as she got to the bus stop.

When she got inside, it smelled like summer. The smell of acrid chemicals. She knew it well. The same smell as the school pool.

The source of it was immediately apparent.

There was a group of elementary school girls with dripping wet hair occupying the back two rows of the bus.

Most of them were dozing.

Some of the girls were leaning their heads against the windows, barely moving a muscle.

Their butts were scooped forwards, like they'd slid down the seat.

Unaware that their legs were sprawled, unable to pick up the plastic bags that had slipped from their hands.

They all seemed exhausted from swimming.

Yumi looked fondly at them, thinking that that would have been her a few years ago.

But there was one among them. A young girl that was awake and looking out the window. It was plain to see that she was on her way back from the pool, and she was seated with the other girls so she was obviously part of that group, but there was something about her that looked different.

The scenery flowing past the bus didn't seem to be reflected in her eyes. It didn't feel as though she was watching it because she was interested. It seemed more like she was doing it out of some sense of duty.

Nor was it that she was too tired to sleep. As proof of that, her eyelids would close from time to time and she'd rub them to keep herself awake.

The bus announcer called out the name of the next stop. Then that girl quickly stood up and started rousing her friends, one by one.

(Ah, so that's it.)

Yumi finally understood. They weren't going to the end of the line, they had to get off midway through. And so, afraid of missing their stop, this girl alone had desperately battled against exhaustion.



The girl pressed the buzzer and her group safely got off at their intended stop. Had the many sleeping girls realized this one girl's achievement?

As she watched them through the window, the girls happily walked down the footpath. Yumi could no longer tell which one it was that had remained awake.

At some point, Yumi had stopped noticing the smell of the pool.

But when a young boy got on at the next stop, he said, "Ah, it smells like the pool," to his father beside him.

## Part 4.

"Yumi."

On the path between the north and south entrances of M Station, just past the ticket gate, a voice called out to her. Yumi stopped walking and slowly turned around.

There was no mistaking it. It was her beloved onee-sama's voice.

"Gokigenyou, onee-sama."

"It's a bit early, so I wasn't expecting to see anyone."

Sachiko-sama said as she trotted over. Instead of her school bag, she had a heavy looking tote bag hanging from her shoulder.

Perhaps noticing Yumi's gaze, Sachiko-sama smiled as she patted the bag.

"See, the library's open today. I've got the books I borrowed the other day in here. Oh, did you arrive early because you were going to the library too, Yumi?"

"Ah, no."

She hadn't known that the library was open today. No, wait. She might have read that in the bulletin put out by the student library committee, but she hadn't checked each and every open day.

"Hot, isn't it?"

Sachiko-sama raised a hand to shield her eyes when they exited through the north gate. The footpath through the turnaround area was baking from the sun's rays, and the rising heat made it feel like they would dry out completely if they stopped there. Even if the store fronts were watered down, they would just dry straight away.

The bus that looped between M station and Lillian's was waiting at the bus stop for its scheduled departure time. They gently tapped on the door, which was closed to keep the cool air in, to let the driver know they wanted to board.

The door opened with a psssh sound. Since their student travel pass was no good during the holidays, they both fed their bus cards into the machine before boarding.

After about five minutes spent waiting in the cool bus, they departed right on schedule. No-one else had got on, so it was like they had chartered the bus.

There were plenty of seats, but they sat right next to each other on a two-seater. In the window seat, Sachiko-sama silently watched the scenery outside for a little while. Yumi was reminded somewhat of the young girl from earlier.

Her silent profile. Just what was her onee-sama thinking about right at this moment?

She certainly wouldn't be imagining that in a few hours from now her petit soeur beside her was going to try and force her into a meeting with students from Hanadera.

"It's about Yuuki-san."

Sachiko-sama suddenly opened her mouth.

"Ah, yes."

Thump.

Surely she hadn't read her mind telepathically? Sachiko-sama's words came with such incredible timing that it seemed possible.

"What about my brother?"

Yumi asked gingerly. They were the only two passengers in the bus, they were seated next to each other, and there was still some distance to go before they reached the bus stop in front of Lillian's. Given the situation, Yumi didn't have the nerves of steel that would be required to give her onee-sama the cold shoulder and ignore her.

"I heard this in passing from Suguru-san a while ago, but Yuuki-san's a member of the Hanadera student council, isn't he?"

"Hmm ... a student council member? I'm not really sure, but I don't think he's as important as that. I think he's more of an assistant."

"Really? Well, that's fine."

Sachiko-sama smiled.

"As his older sister, there's something that I'd like your support with, Yumi. I'm going to ask him to assist us with our school festival."

Not, "Would it be okay to ask him," or, "I'm thinking about asking him," but, "I'm going to ask him." Apparently she'd already made up her mind.

"Hmm, Yuuki at the Lillian's school festival – "

So that's it, by nominating Yuuki, who she was fine with, Sachiko-sama could keep unknown males at bay. A brilliant plan.

"What are we doing this year?"

"A play, of course."

"I knew it."

In her mind, Yumi apologized. "Sorry, Yuuki. I'm no match for my onee-sama."

Since Sachiko-sama had made up her mind, even with Maria-sama's strength there was probably no chance of getting her to reconsider.

"Last year, because I boycotted all the meetings with Hanadera, the onee-samas cast Suguru-san in the prince's role without my knowledge, and I was most distressed when I found out. I'm so relieved that I won't have to worry about that this year."

"\_"

Onee-sama, you shouldn't feel too relieved about that. The sly old seniors may have graduated, but the petit soeurs that remained were plotting in the shadows.

But Sachiko-sama. It looked as though she'd completely forgotten about the Hanadera school festival, which was coming up before Lillian's. Either that, or she was trying to avoid thinking about it.

"Although I think we'll have to make a formal request in writing to their student council in September. But before that, Yumi, can you inform him of this? It could be a shock if it comes out of the blue."

"Ah ... okay."

But there was no need for Yumi to go out of her way to do this, Sachiko-sama would probably be able to sound out Yuuki herself in a couple of hours time.

"But it's strange, isn't it? It was because of what happened with Sugurus-san last year that I was able to take you as my petit soeur."

"Huh ... "

But it was the petit soeur that was the chief conspirator this time. Yumi started feeling worse and worse about this, before unthinkingly opening her mouth:

"O-onee-sama, I – "

However.

"Ah, we're here."

Was it good luck or bad? Sachiko-sama stood up.

The bus had arrived at their destination a lot quicker than usual. Since Yumi and Sachiko-sama had been the only passengers in the beginning, it obviously didn't need to stop mid-journey to let people off, and luckily there hadn't been any passengers waiting to get on at any of the stops, so the bus had been like an express train rushing past all the stops until it arrived here.

"What was it, Yumi?"

Sachiko-sama asked, after they disembarked.

" – Nothing."

Yumi shook her head, having changed her mind.

It would all come to nothing if she confessed here. If Sachiko-sama were to run away, it would be an insult to the other members of the Yamayurikai, but more than that to the members of the Hanadera student council that were meeting today.

"But you'd started to say something."

Sachiko-sama's words pricked at her breast.

"Sorry. It's slipped my mind."

Her own words pricked her even more.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

Yumi thought herself weak for backing down like that. There was no doubt about it, she'd never have the personality of a mob boss.

She looked down at her feet as she walked, probably so she wouldn't have to look at her onee-sama's face.

There was a crack in the sidewalk, with grass growing up through it.

A discarded icy-pole stick.

Yumi's head slowly drooped further down.

"Oh Yumi."

Sachiko-sama's voice called out to her from behind.

"Ah, yes. Huh?"

It seemed as though she'd outdistanced Sachiko-sama without noticing, because she'd been looking down. There was a gap of about five metres between them.

"I even told you to wait for a little while. Didn't you hear me?"

It looked as though Sachiko-sama had stopped to get something out of her bag. But Yumi hadn't noticed at all.

"Here, see."

Sachiko-sama caught up to her and held out a small, moist hand-towel.

"The nape of your neck's uncovered and looks hot. It may be somewhat indecent, but you could put this over it."

Before Yumi could respond, the back of her neck turned chilly.

"Th-thank-you."

"Don't mention it."

Her onee-sama always seemed delighted when she could help out like this. Yumi thought she was a terrible petit soeur for trying to ensnare Sachiko-sama, who was so kind.

"But anyway, what were you looking at so intently? Insects? Do you want to become like **Fabre**?"

Another prick at her heart.

"... Ow!"

"What's the matter, Yumi?"

While she and her onee-sama were looking down, a black ant really did bite Yumi on the calf.

## Part 5.

With things the way they were, just looking at the school gates was painful.

The Hanadera students would gather in front of them in a few hours, and then the brother and sister comedy act would begin.

Passing through the gates onto the path lined with ginkgo trees, the pleasant sound of balls being firmly struck could be heard faintly, probably coming from the tennis courts.

In the university grounds to her right, there was the occasional group of two or three college students scattered about here and there.

She joined her hands together in prayer at the statue of Maria-sama at the fork in the path, but she had no idea what she should discuss with Maria-sama, so from the bottom of her heart she thought, "I'm sorry."

She couldn't ask for help for Yuuki at this point. – Or, rather, in truth her mind was filled with Sachiko-sama, not sparing a thought for her brother.

She accompanied Sachiko-sama on her brief visit to the library. All up there were five books Sachiko-sama was returning to the library counter. They all appeared to be classical Japanese literature.

"They were quite interesting. If you'd like, you could borrow them after me, Yumi. I particularly recommend this one."

Sachiko-sama held out the book she'd chosen.

Yumi didn't have the strength to resist, so she gave her library card to the staff member and went through the formalities of borrowing the book.

After leaving the library, they slowly walked towards the school building. They didn't have to go all the way over to main entrance, since they were using carry-around slip-ons instead of their indoor shoes during the holidays. So they bypassed the building corridors and went straight to the Rose Mansion.



As they walked around the back of the school building, the library book she carried in her left hand and the presence of the moist towel on her neck became heavier and heavier until she could no longer stand it.

"I'm sorry, onee-sama."

She finally came to a halt, unable to take another step.

"What are you talking about?"

Sachiko-sama had noticed immediately, and turned around before asking this question.

"I just knew it wouldn't be possible for me to deceive you, onee-sama."

"Huh?"

Even if it was all being done for her beloved onee-sama's sake, it was still a deception.

She hadn't noticed it when talking with the others, or while endlessly tinkering with the plan, but now that she was here with Sachiko-sama, Yumi couldn't bring herself to look her squarely in the eye.

It was undoubtedly because she was, in some way, feeling guilty about it. And if she was feeling guilty about it, then the justification that she was doing it "for her onee-sama's sake" must in some way be wrong.

"I'll phone home right away, talk to Yuuki, and cancel the whole thing with the Hanadera boys. So please forgive me, onee-sama."

With her panic rising, Yumi squatted down, but Sachiko-sama held her by the shoulder and helped her back to her feet.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about with this deceiving, or canceling. And what's this about Hanadera? Please explain things sensibly, Yumi."

Her imposing voice.

It was like being called back to reality from a dream, shattering the illusion.

Because, no matter what happened, the most important thing was to stand alongside her onee-sama. That was what Yumi had finally remembered.

" – So that's it."

After hearing the entire story, Sachiko-sama chuckled.

"I understand the situation. It looks like you've been busy with all sorts of things lately."

They'd chosen to have this conversation under the shade of a tree around the back of the Rose Mansion to avoid being noticed.

"But, why? Knowing that it would undo all your hard work, why did you confess to me? You only had to last a little while longer."

"What would you have done if I hadn't, onee-sama?"

Yumi threw the question out there. Since she hadn't chosen to go down that path, she could let her imagination run wild, or ask Sachiko-sama herself what the result would have been.

"Let's see."

Sachiko-sama thought for a while before answering.

"I would have seen through your little charade immediately and been incensed by it. I may have gone into hysterics. I suppose I would have taken it out on a handkerchief. Ripping it to shreds."

That was scary. Incredibly scary.

"But, as angry as I was, I would have gone to the meeting. Because by using my anger, I would more or less be able to maintain my equilibrium. My hysteria's an armor built from indulgence. I would flaunt it because I'd know that you, Rei, and all of the other Yamayurikai members would forgive me. I'd be angry, knowing full well that you'd done all this on account of me."

Sachiko-sama was able to analyze herself completely dispassionately.

"So it wasn't that bad a plan to get me to meet the Hanadera student council."

"Oh, really?"

"Doesn't it seem like the sort of thing Mizuno Youko-sama would have done? And I would have been forced to go along with it."

So did that mean that getting all worked up about it and admitting this to Sachiko-sama had been a grave mistake on Yumi's behalf?

The conclusion that Yumi arrived at was no.

"But I'm not Youko-sama."

"That's true."

"I know it's a bit late to say something now. But then again, it's only now that I've come to realize it. Well, what I want to say is that I want you to meet them of your own free will. The Hanadera students, that is."

"Of my own free will?"

"Yes."

Yumi nodded.

"Even without any silly schemes, I think you'll soon win with your own strength, onee-sama."

"Huh?"

Sachiko-sama's eyes widened.

Mi-n min min-

The silence between them was filled with the songs of cicadas.

Despite the loud min-min-min-min sound, amazingly the words that fell from Sachiko-sama's mouth weren't lost in the background music, but were carried distinctly to Yumi's ears.

"From time to time, you completely astonish me."

Sachiko-sama reached out her hand and softly stroked Yumi's hair.

"How is it that you can handle me so skillfully?"

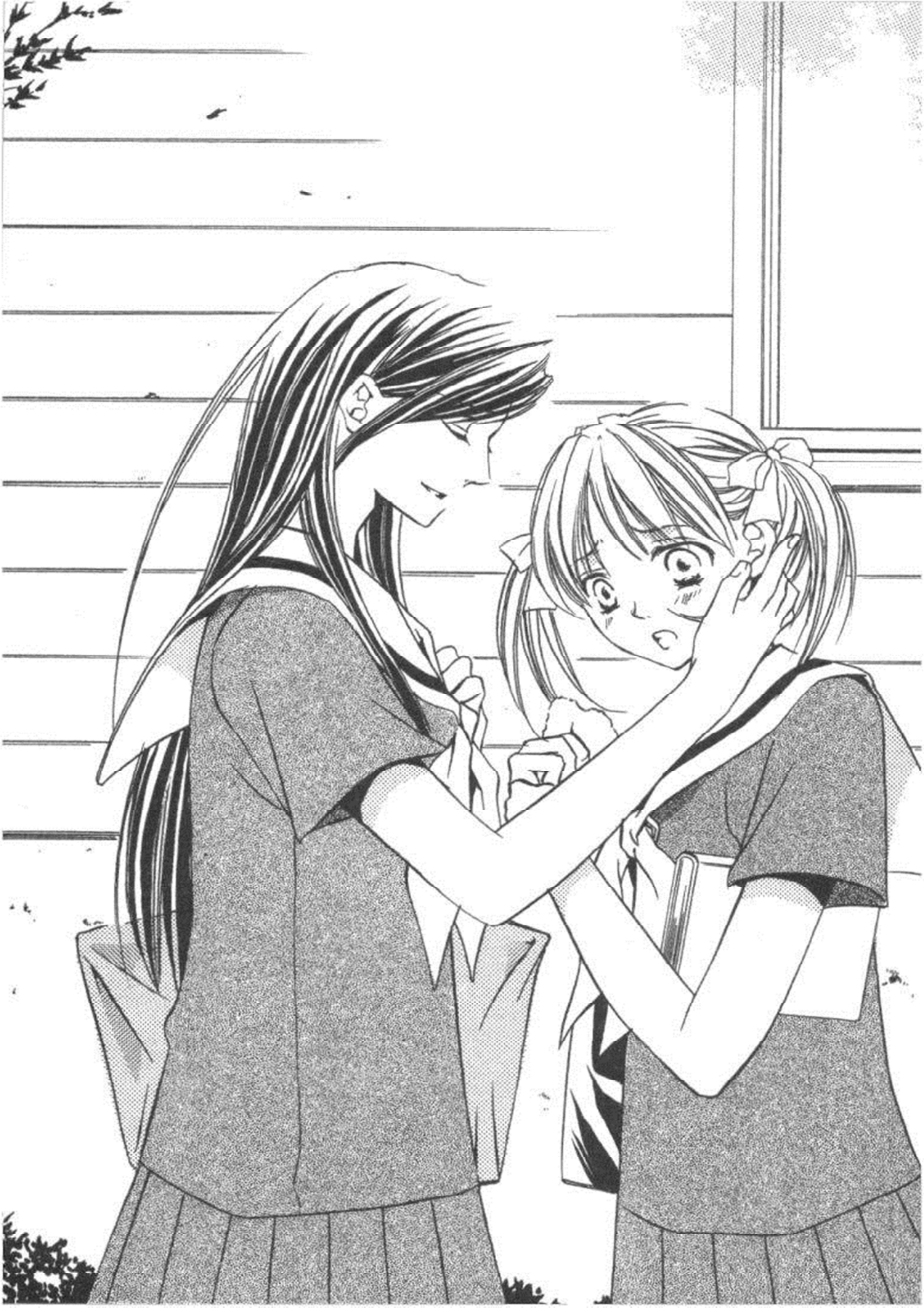
"Skillfully?"

Yumi asked, not really understanding what Sachiko-sama was saying. It felt as though she was being praised.

"Yes. It's strange. Even though you're completely different to Youko-sama. For some reason, your words and actions warm my heart."

Warm her heart. So that would mean that she wasn't displeased.

"Then you'll forgive me?"



"For what? Trying to trick me?"

"Yes."

"It was just "attempted" trickery, right?"

"Th-thank-you."

Overjoyed, Yumi bowed deeply. But the action was so violent that the damp cloth fell from the back of her neck.

"Since I've told you all this, we should start afresh. I'll call Yuuki. They were going to meet at about 3:30, so he'll probably still be at home."

After picking up the towel, Yumi did an about face.

She had perked up and was feeling almost victorious now that she'd told Sachiko-sama everything, but the cleanup still had to be attended to.

She was about to rush to the green pay-phone in front of the office, when Sachiko-sama grabbed her wrist and said, "Wait a minute."

"I have another proposal. Would you like to hear it?"

Sachiko-sama said, then impishly placed her index finger on her lips and smiled.

## Part 6.

The school gates were open from 9am - 5pm during the summer holidays so that students could make use of the facilities for club activities.

The Yamayurikai meetings had been scheduled to take into account the members' other plans.

For example, they were meeting at 1pm today because Noriko-chan had swimming lessons in the morning. On top of that there was obviously class activities, and the schedule could be modified to take into account other personal commitments, provided they were known about ahead of time.

There was no reason that they all had to be present, but if they hadn't made that stipulation then it seemed possible that some members really would have spent every day working non-stop from nine to five. Since it was expected that they all took their roles seriously.

When they met in the afternoon, they'd usually stay at school until just before the main gate was closed. So, basically, they'd leave just before 5pm.

But since there was always a chance that something could change that, Yuuki and the rest of the Hanadera student council would be on stand-by from four.

The atmosphere in the Rose Mansion when they all assembled at 1pm seemed a bit different to usual.

Rei-sama repeatedly checked her watch.

"Do you have some other plans, Rei?"

Sachiko-sama inquired impassively, knowing full well the reason behind this.

"No, not really."

Yoshino-san kept fiddling with her fringe.

Even though Shimako-san looked calm at a glance, she was making mistakes with simple addition, having to redo the same calculation over and over.

Noriko-chan was the same as ever. Whatever was going on in her mind, it didn't seem to show in her face or behavior.

However.

"... Is this how you drink it at home, Noriko-chan?"

She must have been quite distressed to serve a pot of cream with the water-based barley tea.

3:50pm rolled around.

"I know it's a bit early, but why don't we call it a day?"

Sachiko-sama stood upright.

"Huh, already?"

Everyone except Sachiko-sama checked the time. Then the four co-conspirators looked worriedly at Yumi. Their eyes questioning whether it would be alright to leave ahead of schedule.

It would probably take them about five minutes to tidy up and get ready to leave, followed by a leisurely walk from the Rose Mansion to the main gate, so they probably wouldn't arrive at the main gate until just after 4pm.

"We could do that. I've just reached a good point to stop with my work too."

Yumi agreed. Sachiko-sama probably felt sorry for Yuuki and the others having to wait for an hour under the blazing sun, so was calling their meeting to a close early.

Her nonchalant consideration was so cool. Yumi looked on in adoration.

"Wait for me, onee-sama."

Yumi ran down the shaking stairs, to catch up to Sachiko-sama who'd left the room first.

She felt sorry for Yoshino-san and the others, but this was pretty fun.

Because, as inconsequential as it was, it was a secret shared by just her and her onee-sama.

"... It's hot."

"Keep it up."

Kobayashi handed him a cold can of cola.

"Supplies. On the seniors."

"And the seniors?"

Yuuki started by holding it against his cheek, savoring the meager cooling effect.

"They're already cooling themselves at the cafe. I'm supposed to signal them as soon as I see the ladies approaching. Comprene, Yukichi-kun?"

Kobayashi said, grabbing hold of Yuuki's chambray shirt's chest pocket.

Yuuki had asked that they all wear collared shirts, in order to avoid distressing the ladies, but Kobayashi didn't seem to have grasped the intent behind this request as he had appeared wearing a Hawaiian shirt. Then one of the seniors made him do up the top button on his collar, turning it into a pretty ridiculous look.

"But still."

As he grumbled, Yuuki stuck his finger into the pull-tab and opened it in one motion. Damn it, that bastard had shaken it up before handing it over. Usually Yuuki would be on the lookout for this sort of thing, but he'd momentarily lost his focus in the heat. Foam from the can trickled down his left hand.

"Why am I the only one that has to wait out here in the sun?"

He was ticked off, but pretended to remain calm as he kept the conversation going.

"That's because you've got the first line in the script."

The author of the makeshift script pompously thrust his chest out.

"Ah, right. Well why don't we swap places then?"

"No can do. You can't change my masterpiece."

"What masterpiece? Yumi said it was terrible."



"Wasn't that just a problem with your acting? Aren't they doing a stage play for the Lillian's school festival? I can't wait to see that."

"I won't necessarily be in it."

"Of course you will. After all, you're – "

"Ah, here they come."

They were walking in a group down the path lined with ginkgo trees towards him. As they'd arranged, Yumi was walking in front. He recognized the beautiful lady walking beside her as Sachiko-san. It was just past four o'clock according to his watch. Almost an hour earlier than planned, they must be in a heck of a hurry. But, thanks to that, he wouldn't dry out completely in the sun.

"Listen, follow the script word for word. That's your job for today."

"No way. Yumi and I decided to change it to a back-and-forth exchange between us."

"Then just reel it off and don't give Yumi-chan a chance to speak. Alright, I'm going to give the seniors the sign."

Having said what he wanted to say, Kobayashi sprinted off. At some point, he'd gone from saying "your sister" to "Yumi-san," but now it was "Yumi-chan"?

"Seriously, that guy."

Yuuki pulled a bit of paper out of his back jeans pocket and read over it again.

""Yo, Sachiko-san. Fancy meeting you here. If you'd like, why don't we have some tea? What luck, all our student council members are here too.""

That line really wasn't something that anyone would ever say in a normal conversation. First of all, who would greet someone with "Yo" these days? But just as he was thinking this, he pictured the face of a guy who would start a conversation like that and suddenly felt exhausted. Had Kobayashi been picturing that person when he wrote the script?

""Yo, Sachiko-san." "Yo, Sachiko-san." ... "

He kept repeating the opening line under his breath. All the while, Yumi's group kept getting closer and closer and closer. But it was strange, because in amongst that group of Lillian's students, his sister looked like a proper lady too.

Meeting them right at the gate like this was bound to look forced, after all. But it would be even stupider to try and change the location at this point. Since he could see them, obviously they'd be able to see him too.

He quickly glanced back. Kobayashi was walking the seniors over, and they were approaching at just the right speed.

Returning his gaze to the front, Yumi's group had drawn up to within three metres. Sachiko-san noticed him and smiled.

It was time.

Yuuki took a deep breath and raised his hand.

("Yo, Sachiko-san.")

However.

"Oh my, Yuuki-san."

Just as he was about to start, Sachiko-san called out to him first. What are you going to do, Yuuki? Calm down, you can still salvage it if you move onto the next line straight away.

"Ah, um."

But his mind had gone completely blank and he couldn't remember what it was. The line was written on the piece of paper in his pocket. But there was no way he could pull that out and cheat off it.

"Fancy meeting you here."

"Uh, yeah."

Right, that's what it was, hey, wait.

As Sachiko-sama kept saying the lines that were supposed to be his, Yuuki eventually realized why this was so.

"Oh right, if you'd like, why don't we have some tea? What luck, all our student council members are here too. I could keep going, but what do you think?"

Sachiko-sama asked, seemingly enjoying herself, but Yuuki demurred with, "No, that's enough."

He'd been had.

The people who thought they'd been playing the trick had at some point turned into the victims of the trick. In addition to that, he'd been betrayed by his own sister.

"That's horrible, Yumi-san. You told Sachiko-sama, but you kept it from us."

The girl with the braids who was loudly protesting was probably Yoshino-san.

"But see, if you want to fool your enemy, start with your allies. Isn't that what they say?"

He was going to joke, "When did your darling little brother become your enemy?" but wasn't sure that it was the right time.

"You did good, Yumi."

Yuuki looked at her, and she said, "Yep" and gave him a thumbs-up. So in the end he thought, "Well, whatever." Because Yumi seemed satisfied.

"Do you give up, Yuuki-san?"

Sachiko-san smiled in delight, outshining Yumi.

"Yes. A complete defeat."

He happily bowed his head, and just at that moment.

"Hello. We're from Hanadera."

His seniors arrived and issued their greeting simultaneously.

A small sound escaped from Sachiko-san's mouth.

– Retract those previous remarks. Today's bout with Sachiko-sama was a tie.

Why?

Because when Sachiko-san saw all those different types of guys together in a group – the jock, the girly-boy, the hoodlum, and the nerd – she was on the verge of fainting.

"Ah, onee-sama, pull yourself together."

As he listened to his sister's voice, Yuuki thought, "It looks like the epic campaign to subjugate Sachiko-san's man-hatred still has a long way to go."

# **Together With the Old Gentleman Gathering Material with Dustpan and Broom**

## **Part 1.**

In front of the statue of Maria-sama at the fork in the road, a voice called out to her from behind.

"I've been waiting for you, Nijou Noriko-san."

Noriko lowered her hands from their praying position and turned around.

"Yes?"

It was scary how accustomed she had become to it. When she first entered high school, she had gone through the motions to avoid drawing attention to herself, but now she just didn't feel right if she passed this place without joining her hands together in prayer. Her devoutly Christian onee-sama had had a profound effect on her.

"Gokigenyou. Hot, isn't it?"

The lone older student said as she drew closer.

Sunglasses as dark as her Lillian's school uniform, her hair knotted high back on her head, a white and navy blue striped bag in her hand, and black backless shoes with large floral decorations on her feet. At first glance the outfit seemed mismatched, but on closer inspection it wasn't too badly balanced. Although it required abandoning all preconceived notions about the school uniform in order to admit that.

"Recently, the Yamayurikai members have been preparing for the school festival every day, haven't they? Impressive, impressive."

She was walking alongside Noriko, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Um – "

Noriko wanted to ask, "Is there something you wanted?" but wasn't given the opportunity to do so.

Instead she was peppered with a barrage of gossipy questions, like, "Have you finished your homework?" and "You didn't get much free time this vacation, did you?" Noriko had no choice but to keep walking towards the school building, giving short and innocuous responses like, "Yeah," and "Mmm." Since she didn't know what the other girl's motives were, she wasn't about to provide any careless answers.

Just what exactly was this girl's goal?

Earlier, she'd said, "I've been waiting for you." It seemed unthinkable that she would have been waiting in this heat just because she wanted to walk with Noriko.

"Pardon me for a moment."

Having said this, the girl stopped walking. Even though Noriko didn't consider herself to be accompanying this girl, she still had plenty of time so reluctantly she stopped too.

The girl reached into her handbag and pulled something out.

"Here."

She had pulled out a couple of oolong tea drink cartons.

"It's alright, I'm fine."

Noriko politely refused, then the girl said:

"It's not a bribe."

"No, I didn't think it was."

"Really? Then forgive me."

She laughed airily and put one of the cartons back into her bag, then pierced the other with a straw and started sucking on it in the middle of the road.

Not seeing any reason why she should have to wait under the blazing sun for her senior to finish, Noriko bowed slightly and started walking ahead. Then that girl started chasing after her, still carrying the drink carton, and saying, "Please wait a minute."

"That reminds me, you had a meeting with the Hanadera Academy student council the other day. What were your impressions? It's got me interested."

"... Um."

It didn't exactly look as though she'd just been reminded of it, the way she plunged into the topic.

"Is it true that Rosa Chinensis fainted from shock when she met those honorable men?"

Noriko was glad she hadn't accepted the oolong tea. She'd even said it wasn't a bribe, what a lie that was.

"If you want to talk about that, you'll have to excuse me."

She quickened her pace, fed up with this. She may have spoken a bit forcefully, aided by the heat.

"Oh don't say that, wait for me."

The sunglasses followed once again.

"But I don't know anything."

The girl stuck to her like a snake coiled around her, and Noriko couldn't shake her no matter how she tried. As a last resort, she stood in front of Noriko, blocking her path, acting like some primary school bully. That she would go this far took her actions beyond irritating, into the realm of mind-boggling.

"What the heck are you doing?"

Noriko asked, with a sigh, and that girl just grinned and said:

"Liar. Sorry, just making fun. Actually, I was waiting because there was something I really wanted to ask your help with."

"My help ... ?"

In her mind, Noriko quipped, "And how would you make fun of someone who would do you a favor after all this?" While Lillian's Girls Academy had a strict seniority-based relationship between the girls in different grades, it didn't mean that the seniors could do whatever they wanted.

"One of my vacation research projects is to investigate Buddhist statues. But our school's Catholic, right? So there's not really any good books on it in the library."

She looked regretfully in the direction of the library.

However, wasn't the girl's start as late as it was audacious that a Catholic school would set a report on Buddhist statues as homework?

(Why's she still only gathering data? Summer vacation's almost over.)

Then the girl smiled in an overly-friendly manner and continued, completely oblivious to what Noriko was thinking.

"So I thought I'd do some research on the internet. Noriko-san, can you introduce me to the site you and your friends use?"

"... You could just do a search."

She'd probably expected Noriko would say this, because she immediately adopted a facial expression that said, "Of course I know that," before continuing with the words:

"But it's a bit scary to suddenly jump in, right? At some sites you can rack up a huge bill before you're even aware of it. So it would be a huge relief if it was a site that an acquaintance of mine already frequented. Is that no good?"

It sounded to Noriko like she was talking about a rip-off joint. Not everywhere was like that, but she had heard tales of similar things before, so she understood the feeling. Because she was dependent on her allowance from her parents, Noriko didn't really go out searching for new sites, limiting herself to the sites she was familiar with as a safety measure.

Noriko was caught out a bit by being called an acquaintance, but since they both went to the same school then in the broader sense of the word it was probably true.

"... I don't mind, but it's just a site for amateur enthusiasts, so I doubt it will be useful as a reference. You're probably better off going to a big public library ... "

"Yeah. I'll follow both leads."



"Alright. Hold on a minute."

Noriko didn't see a problem with telling her the site's address. It would be easy enough to find from a search even if she wasn't told it.

"Umm. I think I've got it here."

She'd just happened to bring a printout of the site's homepage with her today. From memory, the address was printed in the upper-right hand corner.

"Ah, this isn't it. Maybe this?"

She'd accidentally pulled out an email from Takuya-kun, so she hurriedly crammed it back into her bag. She'd printed them both out last night so they were stacked one on top of the other.

"h t t p colon slash slash ... um."

The girl spoke as she copied the address into her student notebook from the other piece of paper that Noriko offered.

"w w w ... hey, who's Takuya-kun, is he your boyfriend?"

"Huh?"

"The sender of that email."

"..."

What a blunder.

Despite the handicap of her sunglasses and that she'd only seen it for a moment, she'd apparently pulled that name out of those lines of text.

"Just a friend."

Noriko replied confidently, since she wasn't ashamed of their relationship.

"But he's a boy, right?"

"A boy, well, a man actually."

"He's a male friend, so he's a boyfriend, right?"

"Mm, well ... in the loosest sense of the word."

Noriko was getting annoyed enough that she wanted to say, "If you've got the time to talk about that then copy the address already," but decided

that arcing up here would just draw things out even longer, so she silently endured it.

"Ah, sorry. It caught my interest, so I couldn't stop myself from asking."

Maybe the irritation was showing on Noriko's face, because the girl sped up her transcription of the web site address and then closed her student diary when she was done. After that, she took the carton of oolong tea out from her bag and slipped it into Noriko's hand.

"Hey, wai ... "

"It's fine, it's fine. It's thanks for giving me the address."

The other girl then walked away, leaving behind the impression of over-familiarity, like an old-lady on her way back from the supermarket pushing the sweets she'd just bought onto the next door neighbor's children whether they wanted them or not.

"What was up with that?"

She felt like she'd just been conned somehow.

She had to see her onee-sama's face to remove the bad taste. Noriko hurried off to the Rose Mansion.

It was 12:45pm.

The oolong tea that had been forced on her was lukewarm.

Just how long had that girl been waiting there for her?

## Part 2.

Noriko relayed the entire story as she poured a glass of the barley tea that had been prepared yesterday.

"I think asking for the website's address may just have been a pretext for her questions about the events of two days ago."

She put the carton of oolong tea which had been forced onto her into the refrigerator when she took the pitcher of barley tea out. It was already body-temperature by the time she arrived at the Rose Mansion, so she had no desire to drink it like that.

"The events of two days ago."

Noriko's onee-sama, Toudou Shimako-san, looked puzzled.

"If that was the case, wouldn't she have asked me about it? I arrived here ten minutes before you. If she had been waiting there long enough for the oolong tea to go warm, she should have seen me pass by."

"That's true."

The usual route from the main gate to the school buildings was along the path lined with ginkgo trees, which inevitably passed in front of the statue of Maria-sama. Because Maria-sama was standing at the first fork in that road.

"The reason that she called out to you... if she did want to ask about Buddhist statues, you would be the obvious choice."

They were currently the only two people in the Rose Mansion's second-floor room. From the sample size of two it wasn't possible to say whether Noriko had been targeted specifically, or if others had also been chosen. But they should be able to determine that by asking the other members as they arrived.

"But why do you think she would know about the events of two days ago?"

"That girl ... um, I'm fairly sure she was Tsukiyama Minako-sama."

She may have thought she was disguising herself but it was pretty obvious. If wearing sunglasses and having a different hairstyle was enough

to make her look like someone else, then the weekly gossip mags wouldn't be full of photos of actors cutting loose when traveling incognito. As someone on the side of the people doing the unmasking, surely she would have known this.

"She's been fairly quiet recently, so it's a bit unexpected. Although she is still a member of the newspaper club."

Shimako sighed, troubled. Noriko's onee-sama never criticized anyone, so even saying that much showed how much of a problem-child that Tsukiyama Minako-sama was.

"But are you that familiar with Minako-sama's face, Noriko?"

"Yeah."

Noriko shrugged.

"It's one of the many things Touko taught me when I first entered this school, even though I never asked her to."

But, like her onee-sama said, Minako-sama had been quiet recently and hadn't done anything to draw attention to herself since Noriko entered Lillian's in April. So why was she acting so suspiciously now, as though she was digging for something?

"The events of the day before yesterday."

"Naturally, I told her nothing."

Noriko declared, holding up her right hand.

There had been no touching or indecent exposure during their first meeting with the high school boys, just a simple greeting, but the almost instantaneous fainting had drawn things to a close with a complete loss of face for the Roses.

The boys from Hanadera were getting ready for another round so there would undoubtedly be another meeting soon, but if news of this event got out then Rosa Chinensis' "man-hatred" would become public knowledge.

"My sincerest thanks. It's not something Sachiko-sama's proud of, even at the best of times. If everyone read about it in the "Lillian Kwaraban," then I'm sure she'd feel even worse."

"That's for sure."

Their shoulders slumped as they imagined it.

Ogasawara Sachiko-sama used a lot of energy on her negative emotions, be it anger or despair. They wanted Rosa Chinensis' heart to be as calm as possible, even if just for the sake of the peace of the Yamayurikai.

"Ah, right."

In order to brighten the mood, Noriko led the conversation in a different direction.

"I've printed out Takuya-kun's homepage, the one I told you about earlier."

"Where?"

Noriko placed the printout on the table so Shimako-san could see.

"Ah, you're right. It's our Amitabha Tathagata. That's a nice photo of it."

The three golden, glittering Amitabha statues were featured in the "Takuya-kun's Favorites" section. The statues were from the main building of her onee-sama's family's temple, Shouguu Temple.

"I'm really glad Takuya-kun was given permission to show the main sculpture on his homepage. See, here he's written that it was all thanks to the chief priest."

"I'm sure my father agreed because it was Shimura-san. His knowledge of Buddhist statues exceeds my father's, and he's trustworthy. I've heard they're making arrangements for him to come and stay with one of the main families that supports our temple for a while."

Noriko thought, "That Takuya-kun is as shrewd as ever." Incidentally, Shimura-san was Takuya-kun's surname.

"Ah, right. As requested, the name and address of the temple weren't printed, so you shouldn't be inundated with a flood of inquiries. But if anything does happen, let me know. I think he's already said this to the chief priest, but the same applies if you notice anything, onee-sama."

Noriko said as she read through the email printout.

"Alright, I'll keep that in mind."

Noriko's onee-sama gave a small, slow nod of her head. As always, every single action she took was elegant and beautiful. A divinity reminiscent of Maria-sama. Noriko had felt that way even when they first met.

"But it's a lot of trouble for you too, Noriko."

"Huh?"

Noriko asked, aware of the somewhat stupid look on her face since she had absolutely no idea what the trouble was.

"Because you'll be relaying messages between Shimura-san and I, like a carrier pigeon."

"But I already email Takuya-kun almost every day, so it's no bother at all."

"Teehee. You two must be close. Enviably so."

Her onee-sama had probably meant it only as flattery, but even though she knew this, Noriko was so pleased she made a bold suggestion:

"Then why don't you come along with us next time, onee-sama?"

"Oh?"

"I know it's sudden, but if you're free tomorrow, would you like to come to an exhibition of Buddhist statues at an art museum? I was planning on meeting Takuya-kun there. It'd be great if you could come along."

"Tomorrow!?"

Shimako-san blinked. Surprised by the sudden request. But since the conversation had come this far, it was too late to back out now.

"But won't I just be in the way?"

"Not at all. I think Takuya-kun's intrigued by Lillian's soeur system, because I'm always writing about "onee-sama this" or "onee-sama that" in my emails. In fact, the other day he impudently sent me an email saying he'd like to have a leisurely chat with you over tea."

Noriko made exaggerated hand gestures as she explained about Takuya-kun, and her onee-sama laughed softly.

"Alright then, I'll join you."

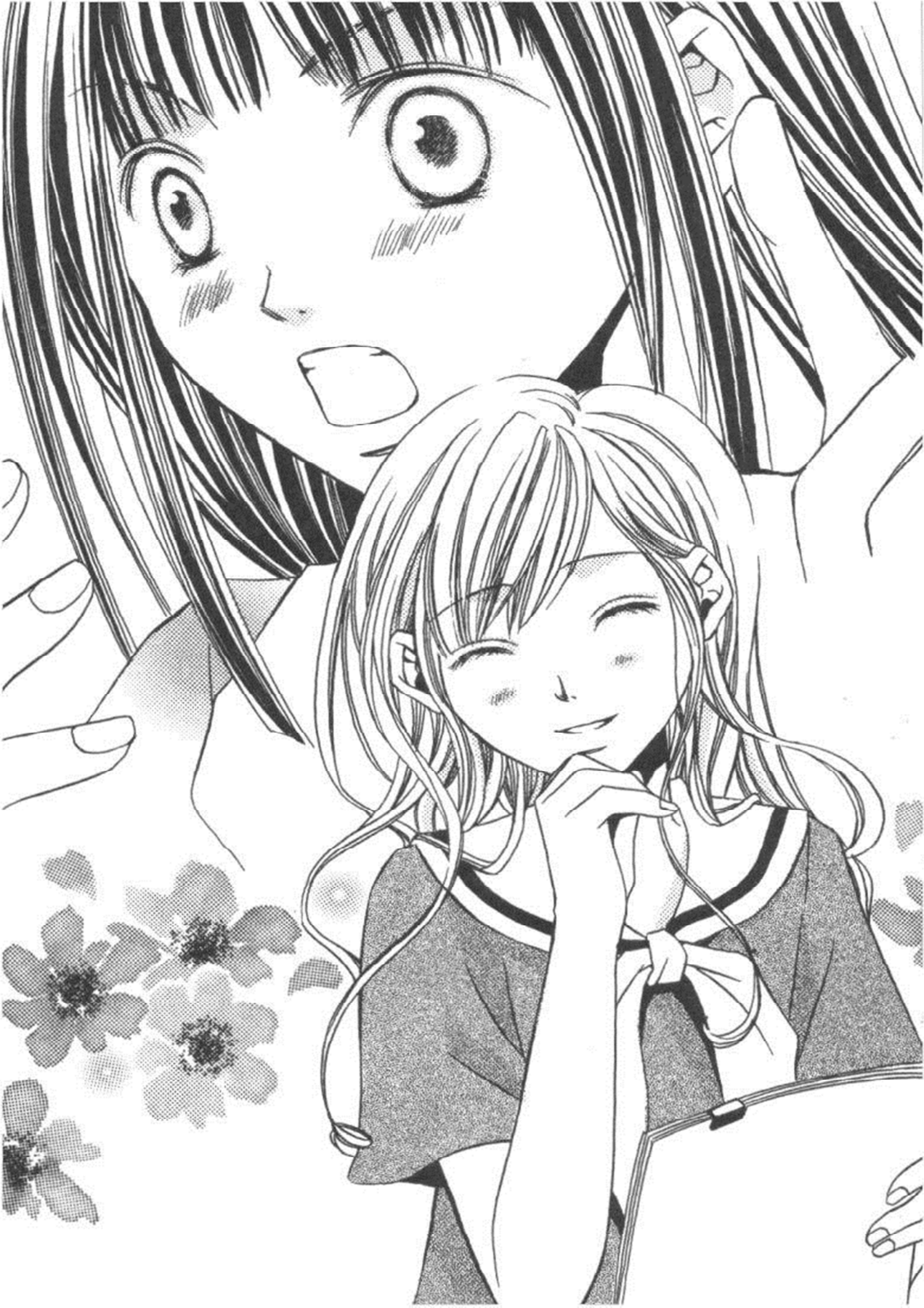
"Really? Ooh, that makes me so happy! Ah, right, the rumor is that they're going to be displaying a Maria Kanon, a statue of Maria-sama done up as a Buddha to avoid religious persecution, so I'm sure it'll be interesting to you too, onee-sama."

While she was still rejoicing, the biscuit-door suddenly opened.

"What is it? What's so amusing?"

The face of Rosa Foetida, Hasekura Rei-sama, appeared.

"Well, um, we were talking about going to a Buddhist statue exhibition tomorrow."





Apparently Noriko's excited voice had carried out of the room.

"Oh my, you two are getting along so well, I'm jealous."

Quipped Shimazu Yoshino-sama, who had arrived with Rei-sama.

"... Would you like to come too?"

She asked, just to be polite.

"No, it's alright."

"We don't want to bother you."

The Yellow Rose sisters declined simultaneously. Apparently neither of them had an interest in Buddhist statues.

While Noriko poured them each a glass of barley tea, her onee-sama turned to Rei-sama and said:

"That reminds me, did you encounter anyone between the school gate and here?"

"Do you mean, "Did I approach anyone?" or "Did anyone approach me?"

The way she phrased it meant that either interpretation was possible. Japanese is tough.

"The latter."

"Someone did, why do you ask?"

"I thought so."

Noriko exchanged glances with her onee-sama.

When she tried to confirm the situation by asking who and where it was, Rei-sama looked slightly dubious.

"It was Yumi-chan, in front of the Rose Mansion. She told me she'd be a bit late for the meeting, and I shouldn't worry. Sachiko had forgotten her slippers and was going to the visitor's entrance to borrow a pair."

"It was Yumi-sama, huh."

Noriko put the glass pitcher back in the refrigerator, then walked over to the window and looked out. She caught a glimpse of what was unmistakably *Rosa Chinensis en bouton*, Fukuzawa Yumi-sama, in the area between the school building and the Rose Mansion.

"But why would Yumi-san be waiting outside? Surely she would be better off either waiting inside the Rose Mansion, or accompanying Sachiko-sama, to get out of the heat."

After downing her glass of barley tea in one gulp, Yoshino-sama answered Shimako-san's question.

"She said that Sachiko-sama had borrowed her slippers and gone inside the school building. And she couldn't go into the Rose Mansion or the school building in her outdoor shoes, right?"

"Ah, so that's it."

To think that someone as methodical as Sachiko-sama had forgotten her slippers. She must still be suffering from the events of the day before yesterday.

"So then Minako-sama didn't call out to you."

Noriko felt a bit disappointed. If Minako-sama had made contact with anybody else, it would have provided a clue as to what she was searching for.

However.

"We did see Minako-san though."

Rosa Foetida said.

"Huh?"

"We passed her at the school gate on our way in. But she didn't seem to notice us at all, because she was running for the bus. Right, Yoshino?"

"Yeah ... at any rate, she had one heck of an outfit on."

That dispelled any doubts that it was her.

Tsukiyama Minako-sama. It looks like your disguise was completely blown.

Noriko felt completely exhausted as the biscuit-door opened and the Red Rose sisters walked in.

"Gokigenyou. Are you all feeling well?"

On the contrary, it was the bright and cheerful Rosa Chinensis that looked worst off.

– Again with the blue visitor's slippers.

## Part 3.

"What the heck's going on, calling me out here so suddenly?"

The for-all-intents-and-purposes head of the Lillian's Girls Academy newspaper club said to the in-name-only head of the newspaper club as she took a seat opposite her.

"Honestly, why have you been procrastinating so much?"

– Those were the first words out of Tsukiyama Minako-sama's mouth.

"I got here as soon as I could. You called me less than thirty minutes ago."

Yamaguchi Mami adjusted her wristwatch and confirmed the time. The sweat gathering there was annoying, so she loosened the leather strap by one notch. It was 4pm.

"Not that. I was talking about the progress of the beginning-of-semester bumper edition of the Lillian Kwaraban."

"I know what you meant, onee-sama, what I don't understand is why you're asking about that."

Mami sipped on her coffee milk through a straw. It wasn't actually coffee milk, it had a more fashionable name that she'd completely forgotten five seconds after she ordered.

Her onee-sama was eating something that looked like coffee-colored shaved-ice. Although she didn't say anything, Mami thought it looked exactly like "snow from a mud pool" as she watched on.

They were at the K station branch of a coffee chain.

The store was crowded with young people.

She'd been told to get there ASAP, so she'd only picked up her notebook and purse before rushing out. She knew she would have received a lecture about it if she took the time to change, so she'd headed out into town in her shabby T-shirt and denim skirt that were barely fit to wear to the local convenience store.

"You don't understand? You know, even though I've stepped down from the front-lines, I still love the "Lillian Kwaraban." So when I see my

adorable petit soeur floundering around lost, of course I'll gently offer her a helping hand."

"Gently, huh."

Mami propped her elbows on the table and let out a sigh, "Oh geez."

"You got bored of studying for your tests and your reporter's spirit came gushing up, right?"

Also known as escaping from reality.

"... But, it's summer vacation, and I'm spending all my time on summer classes, mock exams, reference books and vocab books ... I'm just over it all."

Minako-sama was desperately lacking motivation.

"That's because you're studying for entrance exams, right? If you hate it, you should change course now. I'm sure there's still time for you to accept early entrance into Lillian's Women's University."

"I would have done that from the start if it was a possibility."

Stir, stir.

Minako-sama mindlessly stirred her slushy ice with a spoon. Mami inferred that she'd probably lost interest in its flavor.

But enough about that. There was absolutely no reason for Mami to get dragged into her onee-sama's escape from studying for exams.

"My deepest apologies, but I can write those articles without your help, onee-sama. Excuse me."

Mami stood up, picking up the plastic cup with the remains of her coffee milk in it.

"Last month, you tried to tail the White Rose sisters as they visited various churches and temples but they gave you the slip."

Those icy words were thrown at Mami's turned back.

"They didn't give me the slip, I just lost sight of them."

Mami said, after turning around. She knew her onee-sama was trying to provoke her but she had to respond.

"So the reason you were unable to gather any information about the Yellow and White Rose sisters' coincidental appearance near the Ogasawara holiday house was also because you lost sight of them?"

"..."

Exactly. But it pained her too much to admit it.

"Are they ghosts?"

Minako-sama smirked. That was the trigger that caused Mami to return to the table, against her better judgment.

"Takeshima Tsutako-san's photo."

Mami took the evidence out from her notebook and handed it over. Her onee-sama raised her eyebrows and looked it over with an expert eye.

"It's very small and from behind. You could use it if you had an interview to go with it, but if they refuse then that's the end of that photo."

Mami thought that if her onee-sama was still the editor then she wouldn't have been saying this. But now that she wasn't in charge, she was raising the height of the hurdles.

"You have to stockpile material during the summer vacation, so you can publish a steady stream of special editions once the new term starts. That's the service that we in the newspaper club provide to reward the loyal readers of the "Lillian Kwaraban.""

The service, huh.

"But onee-sama, it's summer vacation now. There's still plenty of time –"

"So naive."

Minako-sama shifted her legs beneath the table.

"You can't wait until the enemy reveals their weaknesses. You have to take a dustpan and broom and gather the tiny specks of dust."

"So the newspaper club are janitors?"

"Something very similar ... Don't just stand there, have a seat."

Before she realized it, she'd been dragged back into this conversation. Mami sighed and sat down in the seat she'd recently vacated.

"I've visited the Rose Mansion with refreshments numerous times, but there were no gaps in their armor, or, rather, the gaps led to nothing. They were just quietly reading over documents, doing calculations, drawing up timetables and making clean copies. Concentrating on their work and keeping idle chatter to a minimum. I followed Shimako-san when she left the Rose Mansion, but all she did was use the phone in front of the office to confirm the price of something with a bulk discount store. It was even more pathetic with Yumi-san, whenever I followed her the only place she led me was to the toilet."

"You've still got some way to go yet, Mami. But even if you're holding the dustpan and broom, you're still just waiting. You have to scare up the material. Weave a web."

"Scare up ... and weave ... "

But hadn't the person sitting opposite Mami been burnt in the past by publishing a story based on incorrect assumptions received from those types of coercive data gathering? How quickly one forgets the dangers. Either that, or she was trying to get her junior to start a fire while she was in a safe spot that the flames wouldn't reach.

"Yamayurikai material is scattered everywhere."

Minako-sama's self-belief shone threw as she spoke.

"For instance, the mixer with the Hanadera student council."

"What's this?"

Mami leaned forwards in anticipation. She'd bit down hard on the bait cast by her smiling onee-sama.

"Yumi-san organized an introductory meeting between the high-school student council members from Hanadera Boys Academy and Lillian's Girls Academy for two evenings ago."

"— First I've heard of this."

"Naturally, it wasn't leaked to anyone on the outside. It was top secret."

Mami wanted to ask, "So how come you know about it then?" but chose to remain silent while her onee-sama was happily chatting away.

"But it seems that when they met at the front gate, something happened and Sachiko-san lost her fizz and collapsed."

"... Rosa Chinensis collapsed?"

And lost her fizz. It seemed pretty far-fetched so far. But she'd listen to the whole story, just in case.

"So, what was the cause?"

"Who knows."

"You don't know?"

Mami felt deeply dismayed, after all, wasn't that the most important part? But on reflection, it would have been impossible for Minako-sama to know the answer since she wasn't a member of the Yamayurikai executive.

"It was probably due to heatstroke or illness or something like that. But I can't rule out the possibility that she was overwhelmed by shock when she saw the Hanadera students."

"Is this year's Hanadera student council really such a stunning array of individuals?"

Mami thought back to last year's Hanadera student president, who had the bearing of a prince. His name was Kashiwagi Suguru-san, from memory. Even now, he had plenty of fans at Lillian's.

"Well, there's stunning and there's stunning. Like a bodybuilder, or a cross-dresser, or a punk."

Minako-sama counted on her fingers as she listed these examples.

"... That's quite detailed. You make it sound like you saw them."

"It doesn't just sound like it, I did see them."

"Huh?"

"Two evenings ago. Right there."

"Wha?"

Basically, the summary of Minako-sama's story is as follows:

Two evenings ago, Minako-sama was on her way home from her summer-session entrance exam prep class when her mother asked her to

pick something up from the shops near K station. It was a hot day. So, to cool off, she hung out at the shops for a while.

"And the Hanadera student council just happened to be sitting next to you?"

Life sprinkled out some incredible coincidences. Either that, or Minako-sama was blessed with better than average luck.

"There was one of me and many of them. Their conversation reached my ears unbidden."

"So, you overheard the entire thing ... "

"What could I do? Intriguing keywords like "Hanadera" and "Lillian" were flying around everywhere."

So Minako-sama pieced together the fragments of conversation she heard and figured out the gist of what happened that day.

"But that's some great material, isn't it?"

Since she'd heard it directly from one of the parties involved, the Hanadera high-school student council. Of course, it would be necessary to confirm the facts with the Yamayurikai before turning it into an article, but that shouldn't be a problem compared to finding the entire story from scratch.

"But things aren't as straightforward as they may seem. I tried to lead Noriko-san into confirming what happened but she clammed up. Most likely, they've all agreed to never disclose those events."

"I see."

Indeed, that group or, rather, those ladies presented a strong, unified front. It was tough to find a loose seam that would unravel them.

"You have to be wary of this sort of material, you can't overextend your lines. You have to attack from where they least expect it."

"From where they least expect it?"

So, despite making it that far, it was still only idle gossip. The strength drained from Mami's body, even though she'd only just started thinking about turning it into an article.



""Exclusive scoop! Meet Rosa Gigantea en Bouton's Boyfriend!""

"What are you on about this time?"

Mami thought she should take what she was hearing with a grain, no a shaker, of salt. She'd run out of energy completely otherwise.

"Exactly what I said. We score a direct hit on Miss Nijou Noriko's date and quickly publish it in the "Lillian Kwaraban."

Grinning. Minako-sama was smiling like she was letting her in on a conspiracy.

"And? Who's the guy?"

"I don't know. It's up to you to cover the event."

Right. So that's what this was about.

"So you're saying I should cover your wild delusions ... no, your baseless speculation?"

"Baseless? Not at all."

Mami-sama took a folded-up piece of A4 paper out of her bag and spread it out on the table.

"Shimura Takuya. A fourth-year at a private university ... that would make him at least 21. Family of four, living in Tokyo. His hobby is viewing Buddhist statues, so they came together through their hobby."

That was some detailed information. It wasn't a wild delusion or baseless speculation, but gradually revealed the shape of a young man.

"Where did you get that info from?"

"The internet."

"The internet?"

"I told Noriko-san I wanted to investigate Buddhist statues and asked her for some website recommendations. That's when I fortuitously caught sight of an email printout."

"Mm, mm."

Mami excitedly urged her on.

"In it, Takuya-kun asked her out on a date."

"Whoa!"

"They were going to meet out in public, which is proof of their closeness. I fished around a bit and she confirmed that he was her boyfriend."

"Incredible! That's amazing work, onee-sama."

Mami usually had to reign in her onee-sama when she went tearing off on some wild goose chase, but she'd become so excited that she'd lost some of her cool. If she'd retained her composure, she probably would have rebuked her onee-sama with something like, "Reading other people's mail isn't something to be proud of."

"So, getting back to the story, I knew I'd found a hint so I hurried home and looked up the website she told me about. Then, to my surprise, I found out that Takuya-kun was the site administrator. So I read his profile and all his old blog entries, which gave me all the info I told you. What do you think?"

"Nicely done."

Minako-sama was obviously born with good luck when it came to gathering material with dustpan and broom.

"So here's your job: You're to go to the place where they'll meet and lie in wait for Takuya-kun. Alright?"

"Huh, what about you, onee-sama?"

"Unfortunately, I've got a mock entrance exam tomorrow."

So that was it. The tension that had been building up inside of Mami suddenly fell away.

"If you get a photo of him, it will be a minor success. If the shot has both him and Noriko-san, it'll be a huge success. Oh, right. Don't try to approach him directly tomorrow, just take the photos. It's all over if you get the film confiscated. Apparently, he knows aikido."

"... Understood."

Mami had no faith in her physical strength. If it came to a struggle for the camera between her and a young man who knew martial arts, she was 100% certain she would lose. It went without saying that she'd do her best to avoid that.

"So, you were saying they were meeting somewhere?"

"I've got you covered. While I was pretending to write down the website address, I made a note about that in my student diary."

"... That's incredible."

Why couldn't she turn this energy towards studying for her exams? Mami slowly started to pity her onee-sama seated in front of her.

"Got it, Mami? You've got the internet at home, right? Hurry back and check out Takuya-kun's homepage, to prepare for tomorrow."

"Yeah."

Mami was about to tell her onee-sama that she should prepare for her mock exams tomorrow too, but then stopped herself.

Since she knew that Minako-sama was in such high spirits that she wouldn't hear a word that was said.

## Part 4.

She typed the address into the browser then pressed enter and before long the front page appeared.

"Hohoho, "Takuya-kun's Buddhist Shrine," huh ... Just the sort of name you'd expect from an admirer of Buddhist statues."

The background was a photoshopped image showing various Buddhist statues praying towards an old, temple-like Japanese house.

Mami clicked on the "Self-Introduction" link first.

*I'm Shimura Takuya (my real name) – a resident of Tokyo and single. I'm currently a fourth-year student at a private university. My hobbies are obviously viewing Buddhist statues, but also skiing✂ and aikido.*

This was all information that she'd heard from her onee-sama.

Thinking that there would be anything new here, Mami went to click on the "Back" button, but just as she was about to move the mouse she noticed the ✂ symbol next to his hobbies.

When she moved the mouse over it, a pop-up appeared with "Early this year, I broke my leg skiing. Because of that, I missed out on seeing the Tamamushi Kannon, which is only shown once every twenty years. If another such incident occurs that interferes with my appreciation of Buddhist statues, I'll have to seriously consider dropping this hobby."

Apparently Takuya-kun would stop skiing on account of the Buddhist statues.

Mami had no particular interest in Buddhist statues, so she let out a small sigh as she wondered if it was really okay to revere them that much. She thought that skiing would be more popular with the ladies.

"Ah, but I suppose there are some weird girls like Nijou Noriko-chan who like Buddhist statues too."

The world worked surprisingly well.

That was why, after dinner, Mami was accessing the pages on Takuya-kun's site, just like her onee-sama had ordered.

But as she went from page to page, even though she'd expected it, she was amazed by how fixated he was on Buddhist statutes.

Photos of Buddhist statues taken from all different angles, like they were idols.

The History of Buddhist Statues.

Buddhist Statue Trivia.

Buddhist Statue Classifications.

Buddhist Statue Q&A.

Buddhist Statue Appreciation Reports.

Favorite Buddhist Statues. – etc, etc.

It even had a forum that was called the "Mandala Forum." She had a look around there, but she had no idea what they were talking about because they were all using terminology too technical for a beginner. At any rate, she was an amateur who only knew the great Buddha statues of Nara and Kamakura and the statue of Asura.

Completely dispirited, she was just about to leave Takuya-kun's Buddhist shrine when she noticed a small rectangular button in the corner of the page.

"..."

On closer inspection, the rectangular button looked like a tatami mat. Written alongside it were the words "Kounoshin's six tatami mat room."

"Who's Kounoshin?"

Takuya-kun's website was devoted almost entirely to Buddhist statues, so she'd initially thought that "Kounoshin" was the name of a statue. But then Mami's curiosity was aroused by the "six tatami mat room" attached to the name and she clicked the button.

The new page was completely unrelated to Buddhist statues.

The first thing she did was look around for the information she was most interested in.

*Shimuka Kounoshin, relative of Takuya, two generations removed. We've had neighboring rooms since moving in three years ago. At first glance, we're a happy multi-generational family, but even today the cross-generational battle between Takuya and Kounoshin rages on beneath the surface.*

"Umm. The parents are one generation removed, so two generations is the gap between grandparents and grandchildren. Takuya-kun's single, so he wouldn't have any children. Since he doesn't have children, he can't have grandchildren. Which means that Kounoshin-san would be Takuya-kun's grandfather. Still, addressing his grandfather without an honorific ... what a presumptuous grandchild."

With four in the family, it meant that Takuya-kun had no siblings, so perhaps he was treating his grandfather like a brother. Mami remembered that some of her classmates treated their grandmothers as more of a friend than a grandparent.

Despite Kounoshin-san's name being attached to the "Kounoshin's Six Tatami Mat Room" section, the pages were still maintained by Takuya-kun. It mainly consisted of blog entries about his rival, Kounoshin-san.

*Today Kounoshin borrowed another shirt from my dresser without permission. Traffic-light colored shirts, ie. red, yellow and green, don't go well with his old-fashioned topknot haircut. I think he should consider his age more. I thought he was my rival, but maybe he looks up to me a little?*

*I couldn't concentrate on my studies because of the annoying sounds leaking out of Kounoshin's room. It would have been fine if it was something flowing like classical music or jazz, but an old comedy recording? The words injected themselves straight into my brain. There was absolutely nothing I could do to stop it. When I complained about it, he*

*said I should respect his hobby because we both liked old-fashioned things. Hey, don't put Buddhist statues on the same level as comedy!*

*My hair was getting a bit long so I went to my regular hairdresser and who should I see there but Kounoshin? I thought that topknots would have been a barber's domain. When had he switched faiths? He didn't notice me entering the store because he was busy getting his beard dyed. Does he think he can find a woman by dressing smartly? ... Impossible. He can try to spruce up the outside, but the years are still there.*

These bits of gossip about Kounoshin-san were far more interesting to Mami than the vast stock of information about Buddhist statues.

And Takuya-kun, despite the completely objective manner in which he wrote about Buddhist statues, why did his writing become so emotional when it came to Kounoshin-san?

"In the end, isn't Takuya-kun a bit too concerned with Kounoshin-san?"

After reading the entire batch, Mami disconnected the phone-line, unaware of the smile on her face. Thanks to Kounoshin-san, she felt like she was a little bit closer to Takuya-kun.

Shimura Takuya.

At some point, Mami had become interested in him beyond just his status as "the guy that Nijou Noriko-san is dating."

There was a decent chance that she'd run into him tomorrow. Mami was trembling with excitement thinking about that.

What kind of a guy was he?

"Shimura Takuya ... "

She was warming to tomorrow's event.

# Up to the Meeting Place

## Part 1.

As she was putting on her shoes in the entrance, Shimako sensed someone walking towards her down the hallway and turned around.

"Ah, father. I'm heading out now."

The faint smell of incense from his kimono. The immaculately bald head that he shaved every day. Shimako loved the "Buddhist monk" appearance of her father.

"What's this? You're going out somewhere?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't look like you're going to school ... "

Today she was taking a break from the Lillian's Girls Academy uniform that he always said made her look like a crow. Instead she was wearing a refreshing white dress with a deep blue floral pattern.

"I've arranged to go to a Buddhist statue exhibition with Noriko."

"Hmm, with Nijou Noriko-chan, huh."

Her father folded his arms and smiled knowingly.

"What a good junior she is, taking you to learn about Buddhist statues. Students like that must be quite rare at Lillian's Girls Academy."

"But we'll be seeing a Maria Kanon statue today."

Shimako informed him.

"... Really?"

Her father mumbled, seemingly dispirited.

"Um – "

Shimako reconsidered her answer, thinking that she may have said something wrong, but her father seemed to recover and spoke cheerfully.

"Right. Are you, perhaps, going to meet Shimura-san?"

"Takuya-kun? Yes."

Shimako nodded. They'd arranged to meet at the station plaza near the art gallery and then they'd all go and see the Buddhist statues together.



"What's up with calling him Takuya-kun? I thought he was older than you."

Her father chided her. He was completely correct in what he said, so Shimako quietly reflected on this.

"You're right. I've heard Noriko call him that and I subconsciously picked up on it. I'll be more careful in the future."

Then her father said something unusual.

"You don't have to take it so seriously. I was just teasing you, you know. If that's what you want to call him, then I don't care if you call him "Takuya-kun.""

"No, I don't particularly want to call him that."

"... Really?"

Her father mumbled in his dispirited voice.

"Well – "

Shimako thought she must have said something to ruin the mood. But no matter how she thought about it, she couldn't figure out how her father had wanted her to take that statement.

Since she couldn't figure it out, there was nothing she could do. Shimako put on the hat that she'd left on top of the shoe boxes and looked up at her father.

"I'm going to see Shimura-san, was there anything you wanted?"

"If you see him, could I trouble you to deliver a letter for me?"

Her dad said as he poked around in his kimono sleeves.

"A letter?"

"Yesterday, a printout of his home page arrived in the mail. I've written up my impressions of it. I was going to put it in the post but if you're meeting him you can hand it over directly. If you don't see him, you can put it in one of the postboxes on your way home."

The envelope she was handed already had a stamp on it but her father was probably thinking that getting it to its recipient a day earlier was better.

"Alright."

Shimako took the letter and put it in her handbag.

"Well then, I'm heading off."

"Take care."

"Okay."

She left the entrance after the rerun of the farewell.

As she walked, Shimako considered that she probably was the type of person that her dad would label as "no fun."

Her father was an interesting person. His claim to fame as a monk was that his sermons were fun and easy to understand. He'd make wagers with the temple supporters and do other things that would at first glance be considered improper for a clergyman, but it was allowable because of his personal virtue.

She was struck by a thought as she opened the lattice door. Was she really joined to him by blood?

(... I suppose we are joined though.)

With eyes downcast she stepped out into the lane, turned around and closed the lattice door.

"Oi."

The door suddenly called out to her.

"Uwaah."

Shimako surprised herself with how loudly she cried out.

"Why are you so surprised? It's just me."

On closer inspection, her father was standing on the other side of the lattice.

"You mustn't have noticed me because you were daydreaming."

"Ah, yeah."

Clutching her chest, she managed to agree. Seeing her in this state, her father seemed to be a bit happy as he said, "Must have been good."

"Um ... father, was there something you wanted?"

Shimako asked, after opening the lattice door she'd just recently closed. Her father wouldn't have followed her here just to scare his daughter.

"Listen carefully, Shimako."

"Ah, yes."

Shimako put herself on guard for whatever he was about to tell her.

Her father looked grave as he informed her:

"Apparently the inbound JR line has stopped."

"..."

– That was certainly grave news.

## Part 2.

The phone rang as she was debating what clothes to wear.

"Hello."

She picked up the phone still holding the white and light-blue summer sweater and light pink blouse she'd been looking at in the mirror.

*"Noriko?"*

"Ah, onee-sama. Good morning."

As she gave this greeting she sensed there was some kind of problem, since Shimako-san had said, "Noriko?" without any preface.

*"Noriko, you were coming on the JR line, right? Did you know it's stopped?"*

"What? It's stopped!?"

This was indeed an urgent telephone call. Sensing the topic of conversation, her great-aunt / landlady Sumireko-san switched on the TV in the living room. But unfortunately none of the channels were showing a ribbon of text about train line outages.

*"I heard there was an accident. I'm not sure when it'll start again. I can get there on a private railway, but will you be okay?"*

"Um."

Despite Shimako-san's question, Noriko was in a mild panic because she hadn't been expecting this situation and her mind had gone completely blank.

She'd been living in Sumireko-san's apartment for five months now but she'd never thought about how to get somewhere when the JR line wasn't running.

*"I'm not completely sure, but I think you should be able to get a bus from in front of your station to another station on a private line."*

"Ah, right."

Sumireko-san drew a map on the back of a leaflet showing the train line, along with the names of the buses that would get her to various private railway stations. There were buses leaving from the north and south

entrances that led to train stations for different railroad companies. Surprisingly, there were quite a number of ways to slip into the city center. Then, just as she was feeling relieved, Sumireko-san wrote an additional comment, "But it'll take time. And it's Saturday," which left Noriko feeling dejected.

"You should be fine with any of the private railways, just get on a train headed east. If you get to a station on the Yamanote line then you can switch over there."

"Understood."

*"Calm down. It can get frustrating when a bus takes longer to get somewhere than you expect, but there's no rush."*

"Okay."

She'd understood everything. Noriko marveled at how well her onee-sama could read what was going through her mind.

*"Don't worry, you'll be fine. I think I should be able to make it there at the arranged time, so I'll tell Shimura-san that you may be running late."*

"Thanks."

*"Well then, I'll see you."*

After hanging up the phone, Noriko changed into the summer sweater and a white skirt before hurrying out of the apartment.

Sumireko-san had been watching Noriko vacillate over what to wear earlier, and she smiled and said:

"You can do it if you try."

## Part 3.

She'd failed.

She hadn't known that the JR line was stopped until she arrived at the station.

"When's it going to be running again?"

Mami frantically pressed the young station attendant for an answer and he leaned back slightly and answered, "S-soon."

Just as she was thinking, "Yeah, right," a train really did arrive on the platform. There was no mistaking that it was heading in to Tokyo.

*"We apologize for the inconvenience."*

Belatedly, the announcement that the train had arrived echoed across the platform.

The train that had just arrived was full of passengers from the station before, and the one before that, so despite being 10am it was as crowded as during morning rush hour.

"But the schedule's all messed up, so it'll probably take a lot longer than usual."

The station attendant from before said to Mami as she was leaving to board the train.

"I suppose so."

But she still thought she'd be better off getting on the train. The line ahead was clear. Even if progress was sluggish, she'd eventually reach her destination. It seemed like it would be quicker than getting a bus from here to a private railway station.

"..."

But the train moved even slower than she'd expected. It barely moved at all, as though it was blocked by something.

Whenever she thought she should get off at the next stop and catch a bus, it would move a little. Then when she'd think she wouldn't have to get off, it would stop moving again. It almost felt like it was directly opposing her choice.

"Ah, hi, Kenji? I'm on the train right now. It's not moving at all. It's so annoying."

A short distance away, in the same carriage, a young lady was talking on her cell phone.

"I think I'm going to be totally late, so stay there and wait for me okay?"

(Argh, that's enough.)

If you've said what you had to then hang up already. Mami launched a psychic attack at the unseen woman but it didn't cause any damage to the boneheaded monster. She kept rabbiting on, her speech only interrupted by her shrill laughter.

An old man sitting by the door shook his legs in irritation, muttering, "Unbelievable."

His legs came in contact with the legs of the pretty young lady seated next to him, who turned away from the old man and clicked her tongue.

The old woman standing in front of the young lady scowled in displeasure.

The chain-reaction steadily raised the irritation level inside the train.

Irritation, a surge of anger, losing patience, annoyance, exasperation.

Mami thought that anyone looking at her would think she was oozing irritation from every pore too.

(Ah, Takuya? It's me, Mami. I'm on the train right now. I might be a bit late, so can you wait for me? Because I want to see your face.)

In order to shut out the annoyances surrounding her, Mami imagined making a call to Takuya-kun. It was incredibly stupid, but also a bit fun and made her feel somewhat better.

(Hello, Takuya? Are you, perhaps, also stuck on the train and annoyed?)

Mami didn't know where the Shimura residence was.

But what if Takuya-kun was riding together with her on the same train, in the same carriage? Mami killed some time thinking about that.

## Part 4.

But alas, Shimura Takuya was not riding on that train.

Furthermore, because of where he lived, he rarely ever took that train line.

All this meant that he arrived at their meeting place quite a bit before the arranged time, allowing him to enjoy some time window shopping around the train station.

Naturally, he was completely unaffected by the irritation in that other train and was instead feeling quite relaxed.

It was 10:30.

He'd done a circuit around the fountain in the train station plaza then walked away from it. All he wanted to do was confirm that Nori-chan hadn't arrived yet. But it also gave him the opportunity to confirm his rival's movements.

"... I knew it."

Takuya nodded minutely as he started walking.

As expected, he was following along.





Kounoshin.

He'd found out that Takuya was going to meet a girl and came along to have a look. How pitiful that he had nothing better to do on a Saturday than follow around a family member. He should get a hobby (at least something other than old-time comedy.)

Kounoshin was maintaining a respectable distance so that Takuya wouldn't realize he was being followed.

What did he want? To pay his respects to Nori-chan? In that case, Takuya would reluctantly introduce him, then tell him to hurry up and go home.

"But, wait. What if mom asked Kounoshin to follow me – "

In that case, a careless introduction could potentially have major consequences. Who knew what would happen if Kounoshin reported that his partner was 15 years old.

(Uwah, Shimura-kun you pedo.)

That's how some of his female university classmates had reacted when he'd carelessly talked about Nori-chan previously.

(I don't want to think about that.)

Those girls were of no concern. It was none of their business. But it would be rough to have his own family look at him like that.

He'd have to keep Kounoshin from seeing Nori-chan after all.

– And so with that, Takuya put into effect his plan to throw off Kounoshin by wandering around the station building.

# Search for Takuya-kun!

## Part 1.

There was a man sitting alone, by the window, in a cafe on the first floor of the station building.

He looked to be in his seventies. His hair could probably be called silver-gray, a blend of black and white hair making a lovely gray color – although there was perhaps a bit more of the white hair.

His spring green linen suit was paired with a bright yellow T-shirt, making him quite the stylish old gent.

She pinned her wristwatch down and checked the time.

It was 8 minutes to 11. There was no time for hesitation.

"Are you by yourself, ma'am?"

The waitress standing by the entrance asked, and she replied with, "Ah, no," as she walked inside.

"Were you meeting someone?"

"Mm, yeah."

She answered vaguely then walked straight to the seat she wanted. Of course, since they hadn't arranged to meet, there was no reaction from silver-gray when a young woman walked over to his table. He just continued sipping his coffee, looking lazily out at the scenery beyond the window.

"Uncle."

Mami gathered her resolve and spoke to him.

He looked old enough that she could probably call him "Grandpa" but she thought that this sounded better.

Silver-gray raised his head. Then when he saw Mami's face, he looked confused.

Like he was trying to recall where they'd met before.

At last the answer seemed to come to him. After about five seconds of consternation, he smiled and said:

"I think you're mistaking me for someone else."

"This is the first time we've met. Is it alright if I sit here?"

Mami moved the leather bag from the seat opposite him and sat down.

"I still haven't said whether it's alright or not ... "

"Oh, sorry."

She apologized to the bewildered silvery-gray, but most definitely didn't stand up. Now that she'd sat down, Mami would have to be pried off with a crowbar.

"What do you want? I'm waiting here for someone."

"Liar."

"Why do you think I'm lying?"

"Because you wouldn't have put your bag on the seat opposite if you were waiting for someone."

"Ah, I see."

Uncle thumped his left palm with his right hand. Then he leaned over the table a little way, lowered his voice and spoke to Mami.

"Are you one of those girls that go out with lonely old men. and in exchange they get an allowance, umm – "

"A sugar-baby? No, I'm not."

She flatly rejected this. But that he would even think such a thing was a huge problem itself.

"I'm glad."

Hearing this, Mami thought, "Same here."

"I just wanted you to let me have this table."

"Oh, why this table?"

He was going along with the conversation. Mami faithfully recited the line she'd come up with when she decided to launch a blitzkrieg at the store entrance.

"Well, the truth is, my boyfriend's cheating on me."

"Cheating? That's dreadful ... "

As she'd expected, uncle listened amicably to her story.

If she kept it up, he might let her keep the seat out of compassion. Mami continued talking vigorously.

"I was secretly told that he was going to meet her at this fountain."

"How did you hear about it?"

She momentarily paused at the old man's question.

"... Um."

Damn it. She hadn't thought it that much. Mami hurriedly added new lines to her scenario.

"One of my friends ... "

"Oh, and then what?"

It wasn't clear whether he believed her explanation or not, but he was urging her to continue, so Mami resumed her story.

"I thought I'd get proof of his cheating with this camera. To do that, I absolutely need this seat."

She pulled the camera out of her bag to help make her case.

"But you don't have to be here if you're only after a photo."

"He'd run away if he saw me."

Mami pleaded, in an acting display that she thought was worthy of an invitation to join the drama club.

And then.

"I see. I understand."

The old man agreed almost too easily.

"So, you'll let me have the table!?"

She sprung up in delight, but this time he shook his head slowly.

"No. Sorry, but I want to stay here a little while longer."

"But you just said that you understand ... "

From elation to dejection.

"Because, how about this? Why don't we share the table?"

He made a counter-proposal. Naturally, there was no reason why Mami should object. Since she should still be able to see the fountain even with the unknown old man blocking part of her vision.

"Thanks uncle."

With the negotiations complete, Mami raised her hand to signal to the waitress.

"To show my gratitude, I'll pay for your coffee."

The old man smiled and stroked his moustache.

"Oh my, that makes me happy."

"Welcome to our cafe. Have you decided what you want?"

The waitress asked, as she filled their glasses with water.

"Apple soda."

Mami ordered perfunctorily after flipping through the menu. She didn't have time to bother with minor things like that since her mind was filled with thoughts about the stakeout.

"One apple soda. Was there anything else?"

She shook her head in response to the waitress's question but then from the seat opposite her a voice called out, "Wait a minute."

"Add the mixed sandwiches to that."

"Ah."

Mami turned to him in surprise and the old man seemed quite satisfied as he said, "Thanks for the food."

– It seems that she'd somehow got tangled up with a strange old man.

## Part 2.

"Can you see?"

"Mm, well enough."

After the waitress left, Mami surveyed the view through the window.

As she'd expected, this spot gave the best view of the plaza.

There were about twenty people near the fountain, some standing and some sitting, each looked to be waiting for someone that hadn't arrived yet.

She hadn't spotted Noriko-chan.

"Is your boyfriend there?"

"Um ... "

Not good.

Mami didn't know what Takuya-kun looked like.

But in order to get a photo of Takuya-kun and Noriko-chan together, she'd have to smoke out Takuya-kun and identify him as her boyfriend.

(However.)

This was a thorny problem. Just which one of them was Takuya-kun?

The middle of the day on Saturday.

On top of that, it was summer vacation too.

At a quick count, there looked to be five or six guys aged around twenty in front of the station plaza fountain. If she took into account the possibility that he was baby-faced then that number rose to about ten.

If someone pointed at any of those guys and said that he was Takuya-kun then she would have nodded and accepted it without comment. But because of that, there was no conclusive evidence for any of them.

Honestly, it would have been so much better if he'd put a photo of himself on the introduction page of his website. – Mami wanted to lodge this selfish complaint with the as-yet unseen Takuya-kun.

"Maybe he hasn't arrived yet."

Mami prayed desperately to Maria-sama that Noriko-chan would arrive soon. She must have been delayed by the accident on the JR line after all.

Without Noriko-chan here to show her, Mami had absolutely no idea which one was Takuya-kun.

"What time were they meeting?"

"I think it was 11."

"That's right now."

"Yeah, I know ... he's late."

Upbeat chimes accompanied Mami's forced smile. The clock tower beside the fountain let everyone in the plaza know that it was 11 o'clock.

Almost simultaneously, the Takuya-kun candidates all looked at the clock tower. Others turned towards the source of the sound too.

Just then.

"Ah."

Mami called out, unthinkingly.

"What's the matter? Has he arrived?"

Uncle put his face up to the glass and looked outside.

"No, not yet."

Mami's attention was still elsewhere as she attempted to smooth things over with this answer.

Question: Why was that?

Answer: Because she'd seen someone completely unexpected.

Mami thought she'd been there for a while now.

That white dress with the navy blue floral pattern had been in the corner of her vision a couple of times recently. But Mami hadn't noticed her because she'd only been thinking about Takuya-kun and Noriko-chan. It was also hard to make out her face because of the large hat she wore low over her eyes.

(That's Rosa Gigantea, Toudou Shimako-san ... !)

Mami didn't question why she was here. Shimako-san's petit soeur was supposed to be meeting Takuya-kun here, so it was obviously because of that.

(Is Noriko-chan going to introduce him to her onee-sama?)



This was getting more and more interesting. A completely unexpected development. Tsukiyama Minako-sama would be crying tears of joy if she knew.

– The headline was undoubtedly, "Onee-sama, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend."

"Is there something about that girl over there?"

Uncle asked, following Mami's line of sight.

"That's the girl I'm looking for."

The end result being that Shimako-san was rather unfairly labeled as the "girl her boyfriend was cheating with." Since she'd only come up with the scenario as a way to get the old man to give up his table, she was already half desperate.

"What a pretty girl. ... Ah, pardon me."

"Huh?"

Initially she was confused as to why he was excusing himself, but on second thought complimenting the girl that her boyfriend was cheating with probably wouldn't go over well with most women. Mami contemplated whether she would have been better off showing immediate irritation. It was important to get immersed in a role.

"Sorry for the wait. One apple soda."

"Ah, here."

Mami replied to the waitress and the drink was placed in front of her.

"The mixed sandwiches go over here."

Even though the old man had ordered them, the waitress had placed the large plate with the sandwiches in the middle of the table, probably assuming that they were going to share them.

"What have they got inside them? ... Tomato and cucumber, egg, and avocado, huh."

The old man looked pleased as he wiped his hands on a handtowel. Mami shot a glance at him, but more than the contents of the sandwiches, her gaze was drawn to the small flag stuck in them.

"I wonder what country's flag that is ... red, yellow and green."

A small flag stuck to a toothpick. Obviously not the outline of the sun from the Japanese flag.

"They just picked one at random, don't you think? I saw the stars and stripes in a pilaf some time ago."

Just as he was saying this, Mami saw something in the same red, yellow and green of the flag cross her vision on the other side of the glass.

Just as Mami was turning her head to look at it, she was brought back by the old man's sudden shout of "Ah!"

"W-what happened?"

Surprised, she turned back to the old man's seat but he wasn't there.

"Uncle?"

"... One of my contacts fell out."

He'd dived under the table.

"You lost a contact? That's bad."

Mami was about to help him search for it, but he said, "Don't move." Mami concentrated her efforts doing as he said and not lifting her shoes.

"Ah, here it is. Sorry for the bother."

Uncle emerged from the table holding the contact between his thumb and index finger, then gave it a quick rinse in the glass of water before saying, "Excuse me a moment," and turning around. Probably putting the contact lens back in his eye.

Feeling relieved, she turned back to the fountain and saw that a new Takuya-kun candidate had appeared.

"Ah!"

This time Mami let out the cry and stood up.

"W-What is it?"

Uncle asked in return.

"Ah, nothing. – He's."

Mami muttered, dumbfounded.

"Him?"

"Uh ... yeah."

Her heart was beating fast, like after some hard exercise. Mami tried as hard as she could to steady her heart.

The shirt of the newly arrived Takuya-kun candidate.

The shirt was traffic light colored – red, yellow and green.

It matched exactly with the shirt of Takuya-kun's that Kounoshin-san had cheekily borrowed.

She had no idea how many of those shirts had been sold throughout Japan, but what were the odds of two young men owning that shirt and just happening to be meeting someone on the same day at the same time in the same small area? It was probably incredibly small.

Therefore, she'd reached her conclusion.

"He's finally arrived."

Mami said, pointing at the new Takuya-kun candidate.

No, not the Takuya-kun candidate.

(Found you.)

He was the true Shimura Takuya.

## Part 3.

The young man was about 170cm tall and his muscles made him look toned, if a bit on the thin side.

His wavy, light brown hair was neither long nor short. At first glance he looked like a fairly typical university student. He was more of the "cute" type than the "cool" type. Probably somewhat due to his baby face.

Looking at him, Mami thought he looked like someone she knew. But she couldn't remember who it was he reminded her of. Probably someone from a boy-band.

"... Is that your boyfriend?"

The old man asked.

"That's right."

They hid themselves behind the pot plants near the window and looked outside. Objectively, they looked like an incredibly suspicious pair.

"Hmm, where did you meet him?"

"We both went to the same school."

Mami replied perfunctorily since she was busy watching them, but the old man kept asking questions.

"When?"

"Why do you ask?"

Mami peeled herself away from the glass and looked straight at the old man.

"Oh, no reason. I was just a bit curious."

Oh, no reason? That wasn't the impression Mami had received. Why had he continued to dig into it, seeking confirmation with, "When?" after he'd been told that they went to school together.

"High school."

Mami answered, wary of just who this old man was. Maybe he was some kind of shady fortune teller. Sensing her suspicions, the old man looked out the window and muttered.

"But it's strange, isn't it?"

"What is?"

Mami once again concentrated on what was beyond the glass. In her mind she said, "You're what's strange," but of course this didn't come out her mouth.

"Your boyfriend and the girl he's cheating on you with. They're at point blank range, only five metres apart, but they haven't noticed each other."

Indeed. They were close enough that they should have recognized each other. Since they'd arranged to meet here, they should have been looking around too.

"They're pen-friends."

Mami hastily responded.

No good, no good. She'd made a casting mistake.

Shimako-san and Takuya-kun knew each other through Noriko-chan and had probably never met directly.

"So are they meeting for the first time today? Seems rather poorly planned. They should have both worn something conspicuous, so they could identify each other."

Even though it was none of his business, the old man seemed excited as he talked.

"But no, more than that, isn't it odd that they haven't even exchanged photos? How old-fashioned are these kids?"

How old-fashioned are they? Old-fashioned enough that they'd be called "pen-friends."

"Mm. Well, a mutual friend was supposed to introduce them. But they must have been delayed due to the accident on the JR line."

"You're quite well informed."

"... Well that was the rumor I heard. From my friend."

Even Mami thought that was a pretty lame excuse.

With the way things were now, it may have been better to be honest from the outset. But taking hidden photos wasn't really something to be

proud of, which made it hard to tell the truth. Doing it because of a cheating boyfriend made it marginally acceptable so she'd gone with that.

"I see."

The old man nodded. Her improvisation may just have fooled him. Mami felt a surge of relief.

"Oh."

The guy who looked like Takuya-kun glanced at Shimako-san.

(There, that's Noriko-chan's onee-sama!!)

Mami clenched her fists, sending out all her energy.

But the young man then quickly looked away, turning his head in a different direction. Looking around restlessly. He must be waiting for someone after all. The person he was waiting for obviously hadn't arrived yet.

Next it was Shimako-san taking note of her surrounds, going on a short walk around the fountain. She passed by the traffic-light-color shirt.

(Shimako-san. That's Takuya-kun!)

But Mami's thoughts didn't reach her. Shimako-san walked past that flashy shirt without sparing it a single glance.

"Why are you so worked up about this?"

"Huh, no I'm not."

While this was happening, Shimako-san completed her circuit of the fountain and returned to her original position.

It felt almost like snakes-and-ladders, where she'd rolled the dice and moved forwards only to be sent back to her original square.

Mami took a sip of her flat apple soda.

It looked as though the status quo would persist until Noriko-chan arrived.

## Part 4.

How long would that take?

As time went on, the people that the Takuya-kun candidates were waiting for arrived one by one and they left the fountain.

Despite this, Shimako-san and the leading Takuya-kun candidate remained standing there, making no progress whatsoever. But the fact that he remained there just strengthened Mami's belief that he was Takuya-kun.

The only thing left on the sandwich plate was the parsley garnish. Everything else had disappeared into the old man's stomach.

"You don't have to stay with me, uncle."

Mami opened her mouth.

"Huh?"

"I'll settle the bill, so feel free."

The "to go ahead and leave," was left implied. But the old man seemed to misunderstand something.

"Really? Don't mind if I do then. Excuse me, waitress, another cup of Blue Mountain coffee please."

He said, waving his arm in the air.

"Huh!?"

"Coming right up."

The waitress walked over and picked up the empty sandwich plate and docket for the table.

"Thank-you."

The old man held the traffic-light-colored flag in his fingers and spun it around.

"I told you didn't I? I'm here because I'm waiting for someone."

"..."

She couldn't tell if it was the truth or a lie. But it looked like the old man was going to stick around for at least another cup of coffee.

Feeling a light headache building, Mami concentrated on what was happening outside the glass window.

From here on, she was going to ignore the old man as much as possible. Paying for the sandwiches and the coffee hurt, but she could chalk that up as the price of the seat. She'd had to share tables with strangers in the past and there was no way she'd be able to get any info if she spent all her time attending to them.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting. One Blue Mountain coffee."

The coffee arrived. But Mami didn't turn her head away from the window.

She heard the sound of the saucer being placed on the wooden table.

She sensed the waitress bow and walk off.

Even though she hadn't seen it happen, Mami could picture it as vividly as if she had. In contrast, the scene beyond the glass, by the fountain, hadn't made much of an impression on her mind despite the fact that she'd been watching it.

But that was fine. Because just her attitude would convey to the old man that she was busy with what was happening beyond the glass.

"I wonder if there's something you'd like to order."

"I'm fine."

She responded to his question, but obviously she didn't turn her face towards him.

"But your soda's now just apple-scented ice, right?"

"..."

No response.

"How about the apricot frozen yoghurt sundae? The caramel, banana and chocolate parfait looks good too."

He waved the menu in front of her face annoyingly, saying, "Here, take a look."

"I told you, I don't want anything."

Fed up, Mami turned to look at him.

"— I guess not."



Then she spotted something in the old man's face that hadn't been there earlier and her anger died off completely.

"..."

Spot the difference. Now then, what had changed from before?

"You're finally looking at me."

The old man looked triumphant. As though he had completely missed his own blunder.

"I've been thinking about your goals for quite some time now."

"Okay?"

Calling a halt to her tactic of playing dumb, Mami looked straight at the old man. No matter how much she thought about it, it seemed odd. That thing spread across the center of his face.

"You've been lying."

"You're the one that's been lying, uncle."

Mami said, unable to remain silent.

"About what?"

The old man asked blankly.

"Then let me ask a question. Why are you wearing glasses?"

"I need my glasses to be able to read the fine print on the menu."

"On top of your contacts?"

"Ah, damn it."

At that point he finally seemed to catch on to the situation.

Earlier he'd put on a display of losing a contact lens, picking it up, washing it, then putting it back in his eye. But normally you wouldn't wear both contact lenses and glasses at the same time.

"Since you're wearing those glasses, you must have been lying about the contact lens, right?"

Thinking back, Mami hadn't actually seen the contact lens. Instead, she'd been convinced solely by his actions. Since contact lenses are small, thin and transparent.

"Stands to reason."

"So why did you pretend you'd lost a contact lens ... "

"It's the same as you. It was a lie of convenience."

"Huh?"

"Back to our earlier conversation. I did indeed tell a lie. But so did you, so you're in no place to judge."

"What lie did I tell?"

She didn't know what he was talking about because there were too many to count.

"That young man. He's not your boyfriend."

"... Why do you say that?"

Mami asked and the old man smirked.

"Are you a boy?"

"No."

Mami wondered why he was asking such a wildly off-topic question. How could anyone mistake this cute young girl for a boy? That should have been obvious even without contact lenses or glasses.

"Is that so? Well, it would have been better if you were a boy."

"Huh?"

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"Unfortunately, that young man went to an all-boys school for middle and high school. But you said you met him at high school."

He pointed out the window as he said this.

Unaware that his previous schools were the topic of discussion the young man in the traffic-light colored shirt kept checking the time.

"... No way."

"Oh? It's not a lie. I'll bet you 3,000 yen if you want."

"3,000 yen?"

It was a reasonable amount of money. The sort of money a female high school student would realistically have in her purse. If he'd suggested 300,000 yen then it obviously would have been hyperbole ... which meant the old man was seriously planning on winning the bet.

"You don't believe me? Then run out of the store, over to the fountain and ask him. That is, if you can."

"..."

Since he was going that far, it meant his information was probably solid.

"So you know that guy over there?"

"Pretty much. That's why I was surprised when you said you were his girlfriend, but you didn't know anything about him. You probably randomly picked him as your boyfriend from among the young men you could see. Am I wrong?"

Bingo.

Although it may not have been as "randomly" as he believed. Since it was his shirt that clinched her decision.

The shirt?

Thinking about it further, Mami came to a sudden realization.

"When he passed by the window earlier, you had to suddenly hide yourself. That's why you pretended you'd dropped a contact lens."

"Bulls-eye. It'd have been a bit of a bother if he'd seen me here."

"A bother?"

Mami looked from the young man waiting in vain on the other side of the glass to the old man sitting in front of her sipping coffee.

"Don't tell me, the person you're waiting for is – "

Him.

Then no matter how long he waited, the person the young man was waiting for would not arrive.

Then, on top of that, she could conclude that he wasn't Takuya-kun. Because Takuya-kun was waiting for Nijou Noriko-chan. And since he wasn't waiting for Noriko-chan, he couldn't be Takuya-kun.

"No, that's not it. I'm not supposed to be meeting him."

The old man refuted her theory.

"Then why are you here?"

"For the same reason as you, in a sense. To watch from here. To survey the plaza, including his actions."

He smiled and looked out over the fountain. Then suddenly it all made sense to Mami.

"Don't tell me you're Kounoshin-san!?"

Then the old man spoke as he slowly turned towards Mami.

"How do you know that name ... ?"

"You're Kounoshin-san, right? Takuya-kun's grandfather."

She asked again, looking right into his eyes.

"– You're wrong."

The old man looked away, breaking eye contact. Despite his denial he was clearly shaken. First of all, if it was unrelated then he wouldn't have reacted so strongly to hearing the name "Kounoshin."

"So why did you just ask me how I knew that name? It's because you already knew the name Kounoshin, right?"

Thinking this, she took another look at both of them and despite the age difference they did seem to share a resemblance.

When Mami first saw the young man she thought he'd looked like someone. It wasn't some kind of celebrity she saw on TV, but the senior in front of her.

"Ho ho."

The old man turned to look at Mami with an incredibly displeased look on his face. Was he going to turn defiant?

"Anyway, I've decided not to tell you about that name just yet, since you still haven't yet told me the truth."

"Kounoshin-san."

"So please, don't call me by that name."

Despite him saying he wasn't Kounoshin-san, all the circumstantial evidence certainly pointed that way.

But the image she had in her mind of Kounoshin-san was completely different to the reality. Given how poorly Takuya-kun had wrote of him,

she'd expected someone far more dowdy. But surprise of surprises, he was actually a refined old gentleman.

"It doesn't matter if you're not Kounoshin-san."

Mami tried asking a slightly different question.

"Could you tell me whether that guy over there is Shimura Takuya-kun?"

"Well, I wonder. When you get older, you often forget people's names."

Again with the sudden senility. What kind of grandfather would forget his grandson's name? Suppose, for arguments sake, that he did have that level of dementia, then there's no way he'd be let out on his own.

Given this, Mami decided her only course of action was to tell him everything. Then ask for his co-operation. It was a risky gamble but the potential payoff was proportionately large.

She breathed in then out. Then she leaned forward across the table a little way and whispered, like she was letting him in on a secret.

"The truth is, I came to take a look at my friend Noriko-chan's boyfriend, Takuya-kun."

"Oh."

Hearing this, the old man looked at her in wonder.

"... In that case, wouldn't you be better off asking this Noriko-chan directly? Ask her to introduce you. Then you wouldn't have to be lurking in a place like this, trying to take a photo."

"That's true. But I don't want him introduced just to me, I want him introduced to everyone."

"To everyone?"

"I'm a member of the newspaper club at school."

"Ahh ... so that's how it is?"

"That's how it is."

Even though she hadn't explained everything, he seemed to accept this. He caught on quick and seemed mostly fine with it.

"But still, an ambush by the newspaper club. Is this Noriko-chan really such a celebrity?"

"She is."

Also known as Rosa Gigantea en bouton.

"Hmm. Such a gap in my knowledge, I had no idea.

"She's only a celebrity within our school. No need to concern yourself."

"I see. So it would have been weird if I'd known that."

The old man laughed noisily.

"Perhaps Kounoshin-san came to see Takuya-kun's girlfriend too."

"It's possible."

"But Noriko-chan hasn't shown up yet."

"Right."

Perhaps he was relaxing, because the old man was no longer protesting each and every utterance of "Kounoshin-san" or "Takuya-kun." But more than that he seemed interested in Mami's talk of school as he actively peppered her with questions.

"About this young lady, Noriko-chan, that you say isn't here. In your scenario, she was the one that was going to introduce the two pen-friends, right?"

"Huh? Ah, yeah."

"Then who's that girl that you said your boyfriend was cheating with?"

The girl your boyfriend was cheating with. The old man was talking about Shimako-san.

"Um, she's Noriko-chan's onee-sama ... ah, well, she's not actually her older sister, that's what we call an older student that we're especially close with."

Hearing Mami's response, the old man spoke decisively.

"I understand. You go to Lillian's Girls Academy, right?"

"Uh ... "

"Of course I know about the soeur system that's unique to that place. That girls' school is steeped in tradition."

Never underestimate senior citizens. Lillian's Girls Academy was an old school, founded in the 34th year of the Meiji period. There was nothing unusual about old people being aware of it.

"... My apologies."

Mami admitted her mistake.

The soeur system only existed in the high school division. In other words, Mami had completely revealed herself as a member of the Lillian's Girls Academy High School newspaper club to this elderly gentleman. Mami focused her energies on not worsening her position.

"By the way, where did you hear the names "Takuya" and "Kounoshin?" Did that girl, Noriko-chan, tell you about them?"

"No, I found them on the internet."

"Ah, from "Takuya-kun's Buddhist Shrine?"

"You know about it?"

"Of course."

Which meant he must have checked "Kounoshin-san's Six Tatami Mat Room" too. Given the way it was written, what had he thought about it? Her reporter's instincts fired up and she instinctively asked him what his impressions of it were, to which he replied, "No comment."

What was he doing, putting on airs at this point? Mami couldn't really tell what he thought he was protecting.

"You could at least tell me something, since I've given you so much information."

Mami pleaded, after being rebuffed.

"You chose to tell me all that on your own. It's not like we had a deal."

The old man's lips were sealed.

"So you're just going to listen? Even though your comment of "You're not telling the truth," was what got me to start talking."

"Alright, alright. I'll tell you something very important. This is the national flag of Guinea. It's the reverse of Mali. They're quite similar, so it's easy to get them confused."

He was still dodging the issue, pretending not to understand. The sly old raccoon – although in terms of appearance he was closer to a deer.

"... You're quite the font of knowledge, aren't you."

Mami grinned, her words dripping with sarcasm. But her opponent didn't seem to be affected by this in the slightest.

"Every day of your life is a learning experience. I've already retired from work so I've got plenty of free time to challenge myself in various ways. To learn and for fun. Even the sort of things that young people do."

Understanding dawned on Mami – so that's why he was more interested in his grandson than strictly necessary. His grandson was the closest example of youth culture that the old man had.

"Hmm, it's already 11:30."

The old man said, looking at his watch.

"How about this? Why don't you go and get Noriko-chan's onee-san and bring her back to the cafe."

"Huh?"

"Even though she's wearing a hat, she must be about reaching her limit waiting out in this heat. If Noriko-chan arrives, she'll be able to see from here."

"You want me to go?"

"Well I can't."

He was probably at least somewhat worried about appearing to be flirting with a young girl by calling out to her. But the old man had another reason too.

There was one other person waiting in vain near the fountain. The old man didn't want to be seen by him.

"She'd be better off in here, cooling off and replenishing her moisture."

If moisture was the issue then there was a massive amount right beside Shimako-san, but it wasn't as though she could drink that – to say nothing of jumping in.



"Heatstroke can be a killer, especially to those with a weak constitution."

Despite the serious topic, the old man kept talking in a carefree manner.

"... Alright, I'll go and get her. That's what you want, right?"

It really would have left a bad aftertaste if someone had died because she hadn't done something. While she was desperate for some info about Rosa Gigantea, that sort of thing was far too much for a school newspaper to handle.

As Mami stood up from the chair, the old man said, "Hold on a minute." There was movement near the fountain.

"She's moving on her own."

"Ah, okay."

Had she given up on waiting for Noriko-chan? Shimako-san disappeared from the area they could see through the cafe window.

"What should I do?"

Chase after her, or not? As she was pondering this the old man said, "Well, let's wait a while and see what happens. She might be back before too long."

Just like he said, Shimako-san returned to her original position after two minutes. She was holding a can of Japanese green tea.

"She must have gone and bought that from a store near the train station ... it's easy to see why."

"What should I do?"

"Let's see. How about we wait until she's finished drinking that?"

"Okay."

Mami questioned why she was asking the old man for instructions. Still, she believed his decision was the correct course of action – perhaps he possessed some sort of old-man's wisdom.

The clock reached 11:40am as Shimako-san prolonged drinking her green tea. The young man beside her in the showy shirt looked at the clock

tower, looked at his watch, glanced at Shimako-san, then looked at his watch again.

"Take a look. He's going to make a move next."

The young man let out a sigh and shook his head. Then just as the old man predicted, he slowly walked away from the fountain. Less than a minute after the old man's prediction.

When Shimako-san had disappeared less than ten minutes ago she'd gone in the opposite direction. So he probably wasn't just heading off for a little while to buy something.

"I wonder if he's given up on waiting for Noriko-chan and gone ahead to the Buddhist statue exhibition."

Mami voiced her own deduction. However the old man shook his head.

"I don't think that's the case."

"Why not?"

"Oh, no reason."

She wasn't about to take his predictions lightly, so Mami thought, "Well if that's what he thinks it's probably true."

"Well then."

The old man stood up as soon as the young man's figure had disappeared completely from the window.

"I should be going now."

"Huh."

Mami was completely shocked when she heard the old man was about to leave. Or, rather, she was shocked by the fact that she was shocked.

Despite their shaky start, she'd started to feel a kinship with him as they watched the drama around the fountain unfold.

Mami had assumed that he would stay and watch it through to its conclusion.

But the reality was different.

The old man was only watching the guy in the traffic-light-colored shirt. So when he left, the old man no longer had any need for the fountain-view seat.

"How about you?"

"I'll stay here for a bit longer."

Mami answered. She didn't really feel like leaving with him.

"If Noriko-chan doesn't show up, the girl by the fountain will need somewhere cool to take refuge."

"Well alright, I'll be leaving then."

The old man picked up the bill from the table.

"Ah, I'll get that."

"No, it's okay. My shout, as payment for telling me such an interesting story."

"Uh ... "

The old man smiled warmly and placed the Guinean flag in his breast pocket.

(Kounoshin-san, you're so cool ... )

Mami almost blurted this out without thinking. He must have been popular with the ladies about fifty years ago, with his stylish looks and actions.

Mami thanked him for the food, then handed him the bag she'd moved from her seat.

"The person you were waiting for never showed up, huh."

"Well, actually, they've already arrived. I've kept them waiting for a little while now."

The old man smiled awkwardly, said, "See you," then turned to leave.

(They've already arrived ... ? Where ... ?)

Mami looked around. Since the old man knew they'd arrived, the person he was waiting for must have been visible from where he sat.

Where were they? Who was it that the old man was waiting for?

Mami switched over to the seat he'd been sitting in and looked around some more. Then, after settling the bill, he suddenly returned.

"W-what's the matter?"

Mami was nervous, as though she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't.

"I forgot to tell you the info I'd been keeping in reserve."

"Which is?"

She asked, and the old man put his hand alongside his mouth like a partitioning screen, leaned in close to Mami's ear and whispered:

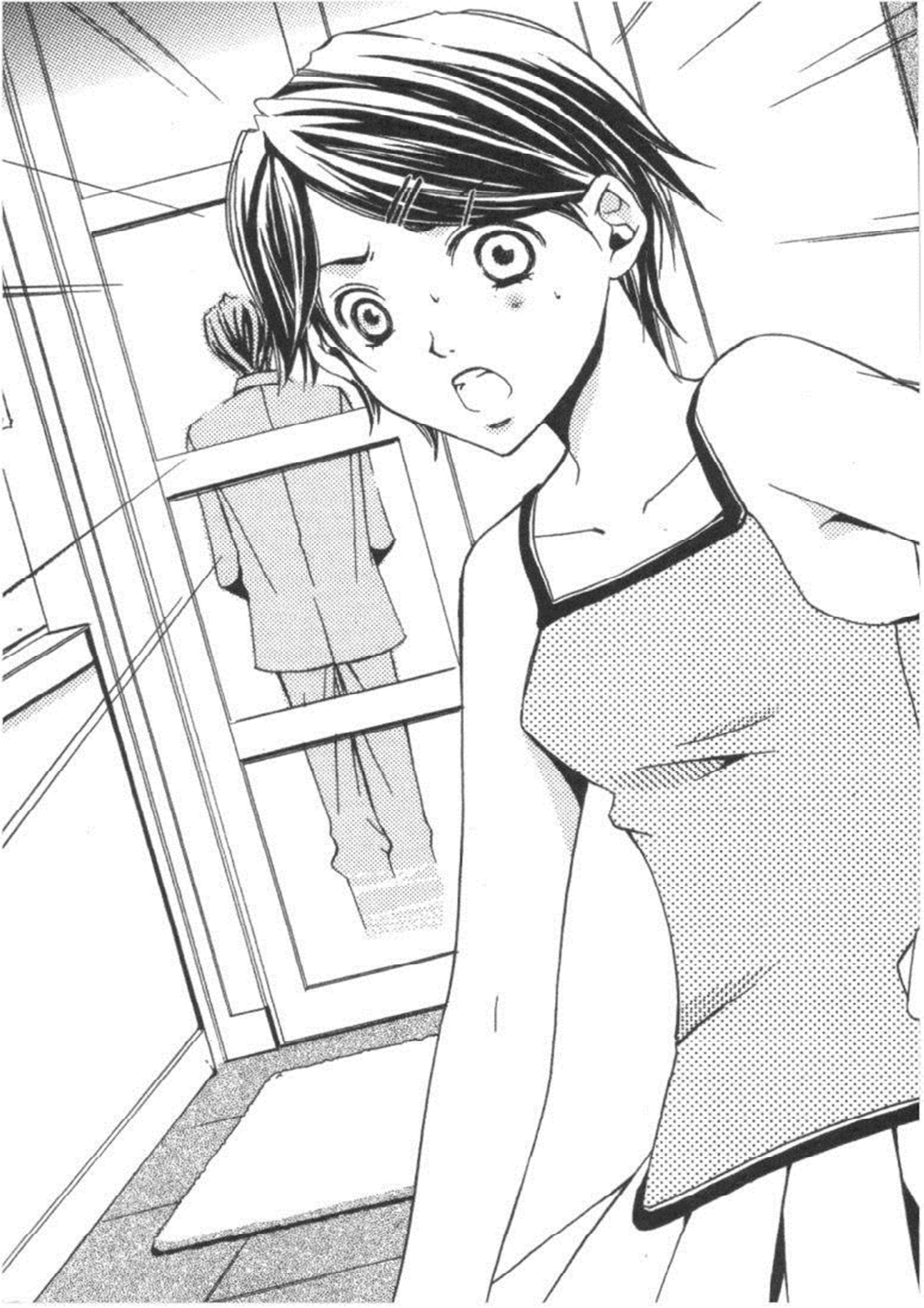
"You don't seem to know this, but Takuya-kun and Shimako-san know each other."

"They know each other ... huh!?"

But those two had been standing there the whole time and neither had said a thing. If what the old man said was correct, then the guy in the traffic-light-colored shirt wasn't Takuya-kun.

"Uncle."

By the time she'd realized this and stood up, the old man was already out the door of the cafe.



" ... "

Mami sat down and took a sip of water in an attempt to put her mind in order.

If that young guy wasn't Takuya-kun, then who on earth was the old man that she'd thought was Kounoshin-san?

At that point she suddenly remembered.

"I never said Shimako-san's name ... !"

But despite this, how had the old man known the name of Noriko-chan's onee-sama?

Not only that. How had he known about Shimako-san's relationship with Takuya-kun, when she herself hadn't?

"What ... how ... "

Flustered, her mind still in confusion Mami looked out the window, and it was at that moment that Nijou Noriko-chan finally arrived at the fountain.

"You're late, Noriko-chan ... "

As she muttered this, Mami took her camera out of her bag and readied it. She delayed thinking about everything else. She had to get a photo for the newspaper or the entire stakeout would have been for nothing.

The headline was, "A Midsummer Day with the White Rose Sisters."

Compared to Tsukiyama Minako-sama's, "He's Rosa Gigantea en Bouton's Boyfriend!" it was lacking a little, no, a lot of punch, but there was nothing she could do about that.

Just when she'd got them both in the frame and was about to click the shutter, something light green got in the way between the subjects and the camera (or more precisely, the cafe window).

"What's this?"

Mami lowered the camera to confirm what it was with the naked eye. The light green object was a suit colored like fresh leaves.

The mysterious old man from the cafe walked in a leisurely fashion.

"Uncle ... ?"

Two young women stood in front of the fountain.

One looked like a western doll, the other a traditional Japanese doll.

They noticed the man in the summer suit, waved, and smiled as they made their way over to him.

"No way, that's absurd ... "

Mami was so astounded by this that she completely forgot to take a photo.

– Even when Takuya-kun flashed her a peace sign behind his back as they walked away.

## Oth of July (Saturday): Sunny

We woke up before dawn.

Leaving the mountain hut we headed for the summit of Mt Fuji.

Whenever I was about to doze off, the old woman beside me would start snoring so I didn't get a wink of sleep. Yoshino, on the other hand, looked like she had plenty of sleep and woke up full of energy. Skipping around in the darkness.

– ( Section omitted. ) –

Having watched the sunrise from the mountain top, we started the descent.

The tour guide told us there was a postbox at the summit. If I'd known about that beforehand, I would have written postcards to my friends in the Yamayurikai and my graduated onee-sama. Such a pity.

I'd heard that coming down the mountain was harder than going up and that proved to be true.

Even Yoshino, who'd been so energetic, stopped talking as much and the pace was noticeably down.

Eventually she decided to pay to ride a horse down.

Her initial enthusiasm to conquer Mt Fuji with her own legs had disappeared somewhere. She said, "This is easier on the legs," then sped off, humming. Talk about happy-go-lucky.

But despite this she insisted I keep the business about the horse a secret.

Was it a problem of pride or the amount of money she spent? It's unclear.



– ( Section omitted. ) –

Straight after the descent, we soaked in an onsen at the base of the mountain.

It wasn't a problem for Yoshino since she rode a horse down the mountain, but I wanted to look away when I took my shoes off. Naturally, my feet didn't get to soak for as long as Yoshino's either.

It was unfair of Yoshino to ride a horse, after all.

– ( Section omitted. ) –

I told our friends in the Yamayurikai about Yoshino riding a horse down the mountain when we were at Sachiko's holiday house, and she retaliated violently.

All I did was tell the truth and she got angry.

If she didn't want me to say anything, she shouldn't have got on the horse.

" – So basically, from reading these diary entries the conclusion I reached was that Rei-chan wanted to ride on a horse too."

Yoshino said.

"You kept going on and on and on blaming me for riding on a horse. In the end, don't you think it was just jealousy?"

"Jealousy?"

Rei spoke up, hearing something that couldn't be left unchallenged.

"Right. Nobody said you couldn't ride the horse. So walking down the mountain was a choice you made of your own free will. But you really wanted to ride a horse. And that's not something you could ever admit. Honestly, you're so contrary."

"I'm contrary?"

Something like willfully reading someone else's diary was the sort of thing that would normally cause an argument between any two people, but for some reason it was completely different with the two of them.

Between two people as close as Yoshino and Rei, there wasn't a division between what belonged to one or the other. There was no problem with her opening the desk drawers or closet, so the diary was something she'd naturally look at too.

"You regretted it so much but you had nobody to complain to, so you let your feelings out in your diary. Am I wrong?"

"Um."

Danger, danger. When Yoshino spoke with such self-confidence, Rei would find herself gradually starting to agree with her.

Even though she felt as though Yoshino was subtly, no, completely wrong.

"So what? Assuming what you say is true, Yoshino, why couldn't I just go on a ride around the local park with you?"

"Because you wanted to ride a real horse, and it's too far to somewhere like a farm. I initially considered something like a merry-go-round too, but like Sachiko-sama said, I think the amusement park would be too crowded in summer."

"But even so, I don't understand why I have to ride this thing."

Rei let out a huge sigh, still straddling the wooden rocking horse.

## **Δth of August (Sunday): Cloudy**

This morning I rode to K Station to buy the latest book in the Cosmos collection.

Between Yamayurikai and club activities I've been going to school everyday, so the neighborhood bookstore was already sold out.

I ran into Tanuma Chisato-san in front of the school. She was going to one of her classmates' house to do homework or something. I stopped and chatted for about five minutes before leaving. I'm always impressed with the enthusiasm she shows in the kendo club.

After picking up the book I wanted from the bookstore at K station, I continued on to my favorite cafe to pick up the coffee beans mom had ordered.

Since I'd gone all the way to the station, I thought I'd get some of Yoshino's favorite candies so we could eat them together later, which meant coming home by a different path.

As I was passing the local park, I spotted Torii Eriko-sama's figure. I hadn't seen her in a while so I was going to call out to her but she was with that bearded teacher from Hanadera Academy (can't remember his name) so I decided not to.

For some reason, I wasn't amused. Was that jealousy?

Pondering this I sped up on my bike and completely forgot to go to the candy store.

"What are you angry about, Yoshino?"

"Dunno."

Yoshino had kept her back turned for some time now. Rei-chan had tried her hardest to cheer her up, but she wouldn't turn to look at her.

"Well which part of that diary entry has got you mad?"

Oh, so she'd caught on to the fact that the diary entry had caused this. But she still hadn't worked out where she had blundered.

"Figure it out yourself."

Her anger still hadn't subsided, so Yoshino thought she'd push her away for a little while longer. Rei-chan should use her head more.

"I'm asking you because I can't figure it out."

"You can't figure it out. Hmm. So I guess that means you don't know me all that well after all, Rei-chan."

"Yoshino."

Her voice called out pitifully, things finally reaching a head.

Poor Rei-chan, despite loving Yoshino so much she couldn't understand her feelings.

She'd tease her just a bit more, then tell her.

That she hadn't liked a single thing about that day's diary entry.

## **Xth of August (Saturday): Sunny**

Today was the last Saturday of summer vacation.

There was no Yamayurikai work or club activities today, so it was my first true day off in a while.

It hit me suddenly that Yoshino and I should go on a day trip to the beach.

It took a train trip and a bus ride to get there. A bit of an outing.

I've been thinking it's about time I got a driver's license, but I've been so busy with the Yamayurikai and kendo club that I haven't found the time to go on a training course. I guess I'll have to give up on it happening this year.

It was already midday by the time we arrived at the coast.

We quickly unfurled a tarp on the beach and ate lunch. As she was stuffing herself with my handmade onigiri rice balls wrapped in nori seaweed, Yoshino muttered, "Plain onigiri would have been fine." Apparently the smell of the beach was an adequate substitute for the nori seaweed – what a cute thing to say!

Since we hadn't brought our swimsuits, we rolled up our jeans and skirt and submerged just our feet in the ocean.

Yoshino was playing like a kid on the beach.

Seeing her so happy, I was pleased too.

It was like a dream.

Up until last year I was unable to enjoy myself fully when we went out because I'd always be worried about Yoshino's heart. But it's different now.

Places I want to go, places Yoshino wants to go.

We don't have to plan everything out in detail, we can just wander aimlessly like this.

After all, today was a first step in a way.

Yoshino was undoubtedly thinking about making one last good summer memory too.

"Hey, Rei-chan. Why don't you write your diary when we get home?"

"Huh?"

Rei stopped writing when Yoshino called out to her. It felt as though she'd been in something of a daze. Looking around, it was already getting dark.

"I know it was a bit of a shock. But isn't it a bit pointless whitewashing things in your diary?"

"Whitewashing?"

"That's right."

Yoshino plucked the notebook out of Rei's hands, opened it to the page she'd just written and said, "Starting with this."

"While I did make a remark about plain onigiri, it was because I couldn't stand the smell of the shoreline. You must have known that by my tone, Rei-chan. It wasn't cute at all."

"... Mm, yeah."

"And this. You haven't even come close to describing what the beach was like. You make it sound like we came to a deserted beach and played in the water together."

"— Is that wrong?"

"Ah, so you weren't going to write about it after all."

"Well, when I picture it, that's what I see."

"Rei-chan, are you that ignorant of the way the world works? The last weekend of summer holidays on a beach that's a day trip from Tokyo? How could you not see that it would be packed with people?"

"... I see. Now I understand why you look so sour when I said we should go to the beach."

"I thought you were fine with that and still wanted to go."

The weather was good (a catastrophe?) and there was a massive turnout at the beach. Which led to the equally massive confusion.

A deserted beach. That would only happen in the middle of winter. But playing in the water in the middle of winter would be a bit nippy.

The number of people on the beach had dropped dramatically now that it had started to get dark. But in the empty sand of the beach there remained all sorts of things that had been left behind by people.

"You have to face reality."

As she said this, Yoshino tossed a supermarket shopping bag to Rei.

"I had to do something, you've been sitting there motionless. While you were hiding from reality, I bought a bath towel, change of clothes and some underwear. Look, you can change behind that beach hut. I'll keep you hidden."

"Alright."

Rei feebly agreed and did as she was told.

"Then we should go home, Rei-chan. Since we have to catch a bus and then a train."

"... Yeah."

After stripping off her soaked T-shirt and ripped jeans, she opened the shopping bag. It was a small mercy perhaps that she hadn't been injured.

Rei sighed as she put on the clothes that still had their price-tag attached.

"Tomorrow we'll go to the manga cafe like you wanted, Yoshino."

They'd gone over to the rocks where there were comparatively fewer people and while they were playing around she'd slipped and fallen into the sea.

This was Rei's "reality" that she couldn't write in her diary.



# Afterword

... Everyone's losing their mind because of the heat.

Hello, this is Konno.

Basically, any impression I gave that this volume would be about the new school term was a bluff. "Maria-sama ga Miteru" is still on summer vacation.

Now because this volume (and the last ones) are set during the summer vacation, there's things happening outside of school, and because of that there's an appearance by men, so hated by Sachiko-sama and some readers.

So this is an urgent message for anyone that's reading the afterword before the main story and thinking, "No way in hell am I reading a story with men in it!" The stories "For Short, Operation OK (Tentative)" and "Together with the Old Gentleman" contain Fukuza Yuuki, Kashiwagi Suguru and a number of other male characters. "Rosa Foetida ☆ Illustrated Diary" should be okay, but it's not all that long so if you pass on the other two stories there's not much to read. Sorry.

But having said that, I don't know how many people there are out there that won't read those parts, even with that warning in place. Well, in general, those who complain still read the stories anyway (not reading them could make it difficult to follow later stories).

Speaking of men.

At least with regards to Yuuki, I haven't heard any readers wanting to get rid of him. I guess it must be because he's related to Yumi after all. He has a surprisingly large number of fans. Because he's world-wise. And kind.

Even Kashiwagi Suguru seems to have gained more acceptance than before ... although maybe it's just that people are used to him now (rarely, very rarely, I even hear of people liking him.)

And the newly introduced Shimura Takuya – lots of people read the afterword first, so I'm not going to say much more about that. At any rate, please read it for yourself.

… In other words, I'm looking forward to the reaction of those that have read "Together with the Old Gentleman."

Konno Oyuki.

**And the number one expected response is:**

"Wouldn't they have been better off if Shimako hadn't called Noriko... ?"